KRISTY'S QUEER CHRISTMAS



OLIVE THORNE MILLER



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KRISTY'S QUEER CHRISTMAS



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THE TREE WAS TO THEM LIKE A GLIMPSE OF FAIRYLAND

KRISTY'S QUEER CHRISTMAS

BY

OLIVE THORNE MILLER

ILLUSTRATED

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KRISTY'S QUEER CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER I

HOW IT HAPPENED

THE way Kristy came to have a queer Christmas at all, was this: she had been very ill at her grandmother's, and though she tried her best, and the good doctor tried his best, she could not get well enough to go home for Christmas.

This was a great grief, of course, for all the girls were having fine times in town, Christmas trees and all sorts of festive doings, and Kristy thought so much about it all and felt so bad about it that the doctor began to shake his head again.

So Mamma told Kristy that she might plan anything she liked, to celebrate the day, and if it were possible, she should have her way.

This was a capital idea of Mamma's, for it

gave Kristy something to think of for several days before she hit upon just such a programme as she should like best. Christmas trees she was tired of, and besides, a tree would be stupid where she was the only young person. At last a happy thought came to her, which almost made her dance with delight. She would have a party, a new kind of a party, and give everybody a surprise. How her guests would like it she did not know, but that she should enjoy it she was sure.

She told Mamma her plan, first making her promise to keep it secret, at least the surprise part of it, and Mamma approved.

It was to be in Grandma's big, old-fashioned kitchen, with its shining oak ceiling and polished floor. The stove that was used for cooking in these days was to be taken away; the great fireplace nearly across the whole end of the room was to be uncovered. The tall brass "fire-dogs" with their queer heads were to be put in place, and a royal fire of logs built up. There was to be no other light in the room, and here on Christmas eve her party was to

assemble to be surprised. After that was over they would be treated to doughnuts, apples, and cider — not another thing.

Mamma consulted with Grandma, and the whole thing was arranged just as Kristy wished. Invitations were sent out, mostly to uncles and aunts and kind neighbors, and hardly a person under twenty years of age.

When Grandma saw this queer list of guests she was surprised, and suggested that quite a nice party could be brought together, even here in the country, of young people. But Kristy laughed and said she did n't want a single girl to giggle and disturb, and added that Grandma would understand when she heard the surprise.

The day before Christmas there were great doings in the big kitchen. The stove was carried into the laundry and a big pan of doughnuts, or nut-cakes as they called them, were cooked, while the fire-board was taken away and the fireplace filled with big sticks on a foundation of solid log.

Then Aunt Jeanie came over from her house

and hung the room with evergreen and bittersweet, and laid down a big rug before the fire, on one side of which was placed like a throne the great "sick-chair" out of the attic, covered with a gay chintz comfortable, and furnished with pillows and everything to make it as nice as a bed.

As soon as it grew dark on Christmas eve and Kristy had taken her supper, the company began to arrive, and two uncles came up to Kristy's room to carry down the "Queen of the Evening," as they called her.

She was already dressed in a soft new double-wrapper of light blue merino which Mamma had made for her, and Uncle John brought her a lovely bouquet of rosebuds that had come in a box from the city, and Uncle Will put on her head a delicate wreath of fresh violets from the same box. Then they crossed hands and "made a chair," which they gravely and with great ceremony offered to the "Queen" to ride down on.

Kristy was delighted; this was somebody's surprise to her. So she laughingly seated her-

self on the four crossed hands, put one arm around each dear uncle's neck, and away they went down the stairs.

The kitchen looked charming, and no one regretted the stately parlor left alone in the cold. The guests were assembled and already seated as Mamma had arranged, in a large half-circle around the fire, Grandma in her usual rocking-chair at one end, and Kristy on her throne at the other.

"Now, Mamma," said Kristy, after greetings were over, "will you please tell the surprise?"

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Mamma, standing by Kristy's chair, "you know this is to be a surprise party, differing from the common kind because you — the guests — are to be surprised instead of your young hostess here. Not to keep you in suspense I will announce that the ruling love of the 'Queen of the Evening' is stories; and she requests — nay, demands — of every one present that he or she shall each in turn tell her a story."

A chorus of "Oh's" in tones of dismay

came from the circle, followed by such remarks as "That 's too bad of the little witch!" and "I never could tell a story in my life!" But Mamma rapped on the fire-dogs for silence and spoke again.

"I hear murmurs; let me explain; the terms are not hard. Each one shall tell of the oddest, most miserable or most agreeable Christmas he ever knew about. I 'm sure every one of you can remember some story, long or short, connected with that pleasant time, and as good 'subjects' I 'm sure you will be glad to gratify our little story-lover."

That silenced every one, for all were fond of Kristy and glad to make her Christmas as bright as possible.

Grandma spoke next. "I think that 's a very cunning plan on the part of my granddaughter, and while you are all collecting your wits, and brushing up your memories of old times, I 'll tell the first story myself. As it is about myself, I have no trouble in recalling it."

"That 's lovely of you, Grandma," said

Kristy warmly. Grandma smiled across the fireplace, and while Uncle Will stirred up the fire to make a brighter blaze, she brought her knitting out of her pocket and began.

CHAPTER II

CHRISTMAS ON THE PRAIRIE

It was all my own fault, the way we spent our Christmas. I 'll say that to begin with. I was a willful girl in those days, and well was I punished for insisting upon having my own way, that strange Christmas day so long ago.

We were all going to my grandmother's to a family gathering, and I teased my father to take us in the big sleigh. The ride was only forty miles, and I thought it would be fine and grand to show off our stylish city vehicle, with prancing horses and plenty of bells.

Yes, I 'll confess the whole. I 'm afraid I was mean enough to think of the sensation we should make in the little village, and of how our country cousins would stare.

Well, after some demurring, father and mother consented and everything was ar-

ranged. A big square basket of good things — which we always carried when we all went together to grandmother's — was packed and fitted under the back seat in a sort of box; Willie's and my presents to our cousins, as well as mother's; mine carefully stowed away in a safe corner, and everything was ready to start the night before we were to go.

On that morning, however, the sky was cloudy and it looked like snow. Father came in and said he believed we had better go by rail after all; we could telegraph Uncle James to meet us at the station, for if it should snow we might have trouble with a sleigh.

Mother agreed that it would be best; but I took it upon myself to be so disappointed, and made such a commotion, that at last, in order that I might have a pleasant Christmas, they consented — as it was not certain that it would snow after all — to gratify me.

Great was my pride and delight when we drove off; horses prancing and bells jingling. Mother and I packed into the back seat, with plenty of cloaks and wraps and fur robes to

keep us warm, with hot bricks for our feet, and everything snug and nice; and father and Willie in front, just as comfortable; father driving, in his warm fur gloves.

The first ten miles were very pleasant, but as we went on snow began to come down in earnest. I noticed that father grew silent and hurried the horses, and mother looked anxiously at the fast falling flakes.

After an hour or so, it settled into a steady, thick storm. The track was soon covered and we could not hear our horses' feet; in fact, after a while we could not see the horses' ears, much less the road.

Mother grew more worried, but father spoke cheerfully and said the horses would follow the track, and he let them take their own way. The horses hurried on, and we should have been at grandmother's. The short day was nearly over, it began to grow dark, and now even I was no longer held up by my pride. I began to be dreadfully frightened, especially as the road was so uneven, and we constantly ran against things and over things

that nearly upset us, so that we knew we were out of the road and of course lost.

Perhaps you don't know what that word means to people traveling on the wide western prairie, where the road is on a level with the rest of the country, and one can go for miles and not see a house or even a fence. The very thought struck terror to all of us. Lost on the terrible prairies, with snow so thick we could not see!

I began to cry, but mother consoled me by reminding me that at most we should not starve, for we could eat the contents of the Christmas basket, and the storm could not last forever. But I felt the pangs of remorse, and remembered that it was I alone who had brought the family into this disagreeable if not dangerous position.

By this time it was dark, and we were stealing cautiously along, the horses almost tired out dragging the heavy load through unbroken snow. We kept watch on all sides for a light — any light that would lead us to shelter. It was eight o'clock in the evening before we

caught sight of a faint gleam on the right, and father at once turned the horses towards it. A few minutes' floundering and plunging of the poor beasts through drifts almost up to their necks brought us near that welcome light. There seemed to be a house of some sort, — very small, — and father jumped out and stumbled about till he found a door on which he knocked.

In a moment it opened and a frightened-looking face appeared, holding a candle above the head. It was a poor-looking woman's face, but she seemed like an angel to us. Father told her our trouble, and asked her to let us come in and stay all night.

She said she could not turn away a dog on such a night and to what she had we were welcome, but she had little to offer us, and she feared we would not be very comfortable.

"At least," said mother, "you have fire and a roof over you, and we shall be glad of them to-night."

Well, of course we hurried out, and thankful enough I was to leave the sleigh I had

entered with such pride. The poor tired horses had to go into a sort of shed where the woman kept her wood, and for a long time father was busy making them as comfortable as he could, rubbing them down and putting on their blankets, while we took off our wraps and looked around the one room of the log cottage in which we were to pass the night, and — though we did n't suspect it then — the next day as well.

The family consisted of a mother and two children, a boy and girl, about Willie's and my age. They were evidently very poor, for there was hardly anything in the house, except a bed with little skimpy pillows, a table, and a few hard chairs. The fire was in a big fireplace, and the one candle stood on the shelf above it. A cupboard on one side held a few dishes, and that was about all.

And this was Christmas eve! and at my grandmother's now the aunts and uncles and cousins were having a merry time, a delicious supper, which made my mouth water to think of, so hungry was I, a roaring big fire, plenty of lights, and lots of fun.

"And but for *you*, willful girl," something within me kept suggesting, "but for *you*, you would all be in the midst of it at this moment."

Nobody spoke of that, however.

Father asked if he could get anything to feed the horses, and the woman brought out a basket of corn. So Billy and Jack had to do without their usual oats, and eat corn out of a pail. They did n't seem to mind, but crunched away as though it were sugar-plums.

It was different with us. We were half-starved, and when we asked about something to eat we found that the terrible little house had nothing but corn-meal and a little salt pork.

How dreadful! I could not bear corn-meal, and I loathed pork, but mother asked her cheerfully to cook a supper for us. So she bustled about and cut some very thin slices and broiled them over the coals, and mixed up some of the meal with water and things, and brushed clean a place on the hearth and baked it there on the hot stones, and by that time I was so ravenous I could eat shoestrings, I thought. So I did make a hearty supper on

corn bread. Father ate, too, and so did Willie, but I noticed that mother only nibbled at hers.

Then we began to think of sleeping. The woman (Mrs. Burns was her name) insisted upon giving mother and me her own bed, but I saw a queer look go over mother's face as she glanced at it, and she utterly refused. She said we had carriage robes and cushions and shawls, and could make ourselves very comfortable on the floor before the fire. So father and Willie brought the things in, and mother spread up two beds side by side, cushions and robes on the floor, and shawls for covering.

Such a strange night as that was! I lay awake a long time, watching the dancing shadows which the fire threw on the rafters of the little house, holding fast to mother's hand all the while, for I was half-scared out of my wits to be on the floor. I thought of rats and mice and many horrible things I had heard of, and I was sure I should not sleep a wink, especially as that troublesome monitor inside kept suggesting to me that it was my own

doing, my own willfulness that had brought this upon the whole family.

I tried to put away the thought — to think of something else; to make excuses for myself; but somehow everything looked different here, and I could not bring back my own satisfaction with myself. Moreover, it seemed as if that little ray of light, that was showing me my real self, was determined to reveal more things. I remembered that I had always wanted to have my own way, and the dreadful monitor reminded me that I did n't much care if I did put other people out of their way, or oblige them to do what they did n't like, to please me, and — and — I could n't blink the fact that I was apt to be very ugly and cross when I had to give up my own plans; and at last came the word which all this meant: it was *selfishness*.

It seemed as if that word suddenly burst on me, and I saw it as in letters of fire. It was a disagreeable word. I hated selfish people, and I had often given up friendship for a girl because of this ugly trait; and was it my own, too?

I was startled, but I could not get away from that stern monitor within, which seemed to have taken this dismal occasion to show me my true self.

Hours I lay awake thinking, about myself to be sure, but not in a cheering way. Even now, I remember how, in this wretched plight, brought on by my own selfishness, I had not thought of any one else; nothing of my mother's discomfort, unable to sleep on the floor, unable to eat coarse food, anxious about grandmother's anxiety about us; nothing of father's cares, worry about our comfort, about his horses, about how we could get on to-morrow; nothing about Willie, the gay evening he had expected, the evident disappointment; nothing of the family we were putting to so great inconvenience; nothing of the worry of grandmother and all our relatives at our absence. Nothing — nothing — with shame I confess it — nothing but the sole, individual disappointment of one small, selfish girl.

I saw myself, and I did n't like the picture,

and with tears of shame I said to myself: "I 'll begin to do better to-morrow. I will! I will!"

I slept at last, and awoke full of my good resolve. The sun was not shining; that I noticed the first thing, and next I saw the flakes begin to fall. Father went out to look at the weather, and reported — alas for our hopes! — a steady fall of snow, fences all covered, no road to be seen, not a chance of our getting away till the people got out and broke the roads with heavy teams, — and it was Christmas morning! I saw mother's quick clasp of the hands, and heard her murmur, "Oh! if I could only let her know where we are!" and I knew she was thinking of grandmother's anxiety. I saw father's face as he came in from attending the horses, and asked Mrs. Burns if she had any more corn, and I was just resigning myself to a great burst of tears, when I remembered the thoughts of last night. "Now, here is a good chance to begin to think of some one else," said the monitor. There was no comfort in thinking of any of us, so I turned to the family of the log house.

The mother looked thin and ill, and was hurrying about to get breakfast, which I could see was a repetition of the supper of last night. I turned to the girl. Her name was Elsie, and she was near my own age. I went over to where she stood near the small window, in awe of her guests.

When I reached her I did n't know what to say, for with the best of intentions I was new at the business. At last I began timidly:

"Elsie, what do you do here on Christmas?"

"I d' know what you mean," said Elsie shyly. "What *is* Christmas?"

"You don't know that!" I cried in amazement. "I thought everybody in the world knew about Christmas! Why, why—" I stopped. What could I say? How could I begin? "Mother," as a thought struck me, "please tell Elsie what Christmas is; she does n't know."

Mother turned. "Well, dear, come here and let me tell you, though my daughter is so astonished that I must first tell her that there

are hundreds of thousands of children who never heard of Christmas."

Then calling the boy John, who was standing stupidly by the door of the shed, as though about to run away, mother told them the whole story: why we keep it, and what we do to celebrate it. John got interested and forgot to shut his mouth, and Elsie's eyes got bigger and bigger and brighter and brighter; and when mother stopped, she drew a long breath and said: "Oh, how beautiful! how I should like to see Christmas! But I don't suppose I ever shall out here on the prairie," she added in a moment, the light fading out of her face.

At that instant a thought came like a flash to me — I believe it came from the same monitor which had shown me myself in the night; anyway, it came the same way, and I must say I did n't like it a bit. I just hated it. What do you suppose it was?

"You have things enough packed into the sleigh to make this poor family perfectly happy for a long time; things intended for people who already have more than they need. Pre-

sents you have prepared for your girl cousins will do nicely for Elsie, those for the boys will just suit John. The mittens you knit for grandmother's old servant will keep Mrs. Burns's hands warm, and the New Testament in big print, that you bought with your own money for grandmother, will be just the thing for this dreary little house in long winter evenings. Then, there is the basket; why carry lots of nice things to eat into a house already too full, when these poor souls have nothing — yes, truly nothing — meal and pork."

I took this new suggestion and went to the window to fight it out with myself. Selfishness said, "What are these to you? and how your cousins will feel!" But, on the other hand —

Well, in a few minutes I went to mother and whispered my thought. Her face brightened.

"I am so glad you thought of it, my daughter. It had occurred to me, but I dreaded to propose it, lest you should be disappointed.

Now we 'll do it, and our Christmas will not be so very gloomy after all, I 'm sure."

Once settled, we entered into the plan with enthusiasm, we even — if you 'll believe me — planned a Christmas tree, for father (whom, of course, we told at once) said we were close on the edge of an evergreen wood. He took John and Willie, who was delighted with the plan, borrowed Mrs. Burns's axe, and waded through, I don't know how deep snow to the grove. Very soon he cut down a nice tree, and the two boys dragged it in, prancing through the snow like a pair of horses, and scattering it on every side. I even heard a laugh from John, at the door.

The tree was quickly set up, and after we had eaten breakfast we went to work on it. Mrs. Burns was interested: said she 'd heard of those things, but never saw one; and the children were just wild; I never saw folks so delighted.

There was n't much to trim it with; only, luckily, one of the things in the sleigh was a great big box of bon-bons. They are pretty

to look at, you know, and we used them to decorate our tree. Do you suppose a Christmas tree was ever before trimmed with bonbons, hearts, and Jacob's ladders, and rings of dancers (you know how to cut them), and all sorts of droll figures which mother cut out of paper, white and pink, which came around the packages?

You 'd hardly believe it, but that tree looked really pretty when it came dark, and the firelight fell on it. But before that time we had our Christmas dinner. The table was set out and covered with newspapers that we had (Mrs. Burns had n't even a tablecloth) and then hidden with sprigs of evergreen that came off in trimming the tree. The things out of the basket made a funny dinner, but was n't it good! A splendid roast turkey, a big chicken pie, a lovely frosted cake, a plum pudding, and beautiful jelly. Not a bit of bread or potato, not a vegetable nor a piece of butter. Mrs. Burns baked some corn bread, and it looked very queer beside the other things. I tell you the dinner was a wonder in

that log house. The children were so surprised and happy they could hardly eat, and I hope they enjoyed what was left after we went away, for it was not half eaten.

Then after dinner was cleared away, father and Willie brought in the box which held our presents. Mother's were really useful. She had a nice merino dress which she was taking to grandmother's Netty, an old servant who lived there when mother was a little girl. It was all made, and just fitted Mrs. Burns. Father had a shawl for her, too. I gave the mittens I had knit to Johnnie, and the Testament to Mrs. Burns, and she was delighted with it. I gave Elsie a book I had for Cousin Addie, and mother gave her a cunning little work-box with all the sewing things in it. Willie gave Johnnie a little set of tools he was carrying to Cousin Harry, and I never saw a boy so pleased.

Then we had some boxes of games, and we showed them how to play afterwards.

Everything that was not too big was hung on the tree, and those two children just stood

and stared. They could n't take their eyes off, and Elsie every few minutes drew a long breath, as if she could not contain herself for joy.

I never enjoyed a tree so much in my life, those two children were so perfectly overwhelmed with happiness.

Then we sat by the fire and told stories and taught them the games, and ate some of the bon-bons from the tree, though we left most of them till we should be gone, and we gave them the bon-bon boxes, which they thought were too fine to use, and the evening fairly flew. Before we thought of it, it was time to go to bed, and I went right to sleep that night.

The next morning the sun was shining, and before long came a great noise, shouting and yelling, and we saw lots of country people with oxen and heavy sleds breaking the road. Father went out to see them, and he found that we were about three miles from grandmother's, but off the regular road. Then we packed into the sleigh again and went off, and mother

left Elsie my old cloak and Johnnie Willie's ulster, that he used only for country drives — we had so many extra wraps for our long ride. Father gave Mrs. Burns some money, too, and when we drove off she stood by the door crying (if you 'll believe me), while Elsie and Johnnie shouted "Good-by," and Willie and I waved our handkerchiefs and called back.

Before noon we got to grandmother's and found them very much alarmed about us. Mother told our story and promised to send a fresh Christmas box from home, but nobody would hear of it. Everybody seemed delighted that we had given away their presents, and brought heaps of things that Santa Claus had left for us.

It may seem strange, but I believe that queer Christmas in the little log house was the very happiest I ever spent, and Willie and mother always said so, too.

"And that 's why you 've been so nice and generous ever since!" cried Kristy as the story ended.

Everybody laughed, and Grandma even blushed a little, but Kristy added indignantly, "You need n't laugh! You all know it 's true!"

"So we do, little girl," said Uncle Will warmly; "the most generous, the nicest, the — "

"There, there!" interrupted Grandma, "that 'll do. It 's your turn now, Mr. Tom."

Now Uncle Tom pretended to be greatly distressed because he could not tell half so good a story, and Kristy laughed at him and told him he need n't pretend, for everybody knew he could make up stories so good that they were printed in the newspapers.

This made Uncle Tom blush, and he said:

"Very well then, Miss Queeny! If I must tell a story, I shall do it in newspaper style. For I can't talk stories; I can only write them."

"Do it any way you please," said Kristy, "only begin! Begin! Sh —! Listen, everybody."

"Well," said Uncle Tom, slowly drawing a fresh newspaper from his pocket, "the queerest Christmas I ever heard of was in a negro cabin out in the woods of Ohio, and I 'll read you that."

"Oh! oh!" came in a chorus from the listeners. "You must tell your story!"

"This is my story," Uncle Tom admitted at last, "and it 's new, and nobody here has seen it," and he turned to Kristy.

"Yes, read it, Uncle Tom," she said. "I know it 'll be nice."

Uncle Tom turned his back to the fire so that he could see to read, and then began.

CHAPTER III

A DROLL SANTA CLAUS

"BERTIE," whispered seven-year-old Lily mysteriously, "I know where to find Santa Claus. Barbara told me."

"Where?" cried Bertie, dropping the block he was about adding to his house.

"Out on the hill," Lily went on eagerly. "Barbara says that Christmas eve the Christ Child comes down on the hill, with oh! lots and lots of presents, and picks them over and gives them to Santa Claus to take to the children."

"What hill?" asked Bertie, jumping up from the floor.

"The one the moon comes over, Barbara says," answered Lily. "And I guess it 's that one," — pointing to the peak of a mountain miles and miles away. "Christmas eve 's this very night," she went on earnestly. "Let 's

you and I go up there and see him and pick out our presents."

"Well," said Bertie, always ready to do what Lily suggested.

"We must n't let Barbara see us, or she won't let us go," said Lily. "But I guess she 'll be glad when we come back with lots of things."

"I 'll bring her a horse," said Bertie, "'at she can ride."

"And I 'll bring her a be-au-ti-ful long dress that 'll drag on the ground," said Lily, starting down-stairs. Bertie followed. Barbara had gone to the kitchen for a few moments; Mamma was busy in the parlor with company; and nobody saw the two children creep down-stairs, open the front door, and slip out.

"I wonder which way it is!" said Lily, when they had reached the walk. "Oh! I guess that way, 'cause there 's the hill," and she turned the way that led from the village toward the woods.

The sun was just down, and away the eager children tramped, too much excited to feel

cold, though they had nothing over them, and too much afraid of being overtaken by the nurse to linger. When they reached the woods it looked rather dark, and Bertie was afraid to go in. But Lily said they 'd soon be there, she guessed; and the Christ Child would take care of them, 'cause he loved little children.

So hand in hand they entered the dreary wood. It looked much darker inside, and, in fact, the short winter day was about over and night was falling fast. Anxiously the two little wanderers hurried along, not saying much, now running when the ground was smooth, and stumbling along over roots and sticks when it was rough.

"I 'm cold, 'n I want my Mamma," burst out Bertie at last.

"So am I cold," said Lily, "and I guess we must be most there; and then think how nice it 'll be!"

"Will it be warm?" asked the anxious little voice.

"Oh! of course, and light," said Lily cheerfully, "and plenty of nice things to eat."

"I want something now," wailed Bertie, the tears rolling down his face.

"Well, don't cry," said Lily, in a soothing, motherly way. "We 'll soon be there now." And on they trudged, through swamps half up to their knees, falling over logs, scratching their faces on bushes, hungry, cold, wet, and at last frightened when the snow began to come down thick and fast.

"I want to go home," sobbed Bertie.

"Well," said Lily, "we 'll go," and they turned around and began to retrace their steps. But alas! they had not come straight, and they only went farther and farther from home.

The prospect of going home quieted Bertie for a while; but when some time had gone by, and it was almost totally dark, and they could see nothing, and ran against trees and hurt themselves, even Lily's courage began to fail, and the tears ran down her face, though she tried to choke them back. But still they stumbled on.

"Don't cry, Bertie," the brave little crea-

ture said after a while. "If we die out here in the woods, maybe the robin redbreasts 'll come and cover us up with leaves, as they did the children in the woods in my book."

"I don't want to be covered up with leaves," sobbed Bertie, who could n't see any consolation in that.

Just at that moment they came out from behind a rock, and they saw a light. Lily was ablaze in a minute.

"There it is! There they are!" she cried. "Look, Bertie! That must be the place!" And they hurried on, losing the light now and then, as a tree came in the way, and finding it again in a minute.

When they drew near the light they saw that it came from a window, and when they got close to it there was a small house with a door beside the window. Lily knocked. In a moment it was opened by a negro, — old and bent and white-haired, — who gazed at the two weary children as though they were ghosts.

"Please, sir, are you Santa Claus?" asked

Lily, with trembling lips and tears on her cheeks.

"Santa Claus!" said the bewildered negro. "Bless yo' heart, who 's that? But come in out o' the storm. Yo' must be nigh froze to death. Who 's come with yo'?" and he peered out into the darkness.

"No one," said Lily timidly, half afraid of his looks, yet reassured by his good-natured voice. "We came alone, to see Santa Claus. But I 'm afraid we missed the way."

"Come alone, this yere cold night, from the village?" he ejaculated in amazement. "Did yo' Ma know?"

"No," said Lily, casting down her eyes. "We did n't tell her."

"Well, come in by the fire," said he, drawing them in and closing the door. "What yo' s'pose yer Ma 'll say when she finds yo' done runned away?"

Bertie burst into loud crying, and Lily sobbed: "Oh! please won't you show us the way back? I did n't think of that."

"Well, well, don't cry," said he. "Yo'

must get warm and have a bite to eat, and then I 'll see about getting on yo' home. I ain't so young as I was onct, and it 's no fool of a tramp through these yere woods after night, I kin tell ye."

It was a droll little place that the children had come into. The whole house consisted of one room, roughly built, evidently by old Philip himself. On one side was a rude lounge-frame, holding some sort of a coarse bed and a blanket or two; on the other a table, made by turning a packing-box on one end. The third side was given up to the rickety old stove, the pipe of which went out through a hole in the side of the shanty, and a rough shelf behind it, on which were a plate or two, as many cups, a package or two of corn-meal, tobacco, and other necessaries, with a lighted tallow candle, stuck into a hollowed-out potato. There were no chairs, but a soap-box by the stove looked as though it was used for that purpose. A saw and sawbuck in the corner by the door and an old coat and hat hanging up completed the furniture of the dwelling.

But, if the house was odd, it was warm, and the two half-frozen children eagerly crowded up to the stove.

"Pore chillen!" said their tender-hearted host. "It's a miracle yo' did n't freeze to death out in them woods."

"We did most," said Lily, with quivering lip. "And oh, dear! how can we get home again?"

"Don't you fret yo'r heart, my little lady," said old Philip kindly. "I see about that 'ar. 'Pears to me yo'd 'mazin'ly like a hot 'tater, now, would n't yo', my little man?"

"Yes," said Bertie, who was more than half afraid of him.

Philip opened the door of his stove, raked away the ashes, and there were two nice potatoes, baked to a lovely brown. He took them out, carefully brushed off the ashes, laid them on the table, brought out a cracked teacup with salt in it, and an old knife, and told the children to come up and eat.

"If I 'd a know'd I was gwine to have company to tea," he said, laughing, "I 'd a got

up a supper in style. But eat the 'taters and I 'll bake yo' a oncommon nice hoecake. Yo' like hoecake?"

"I don't know," said Lily, who stood irresolute before the table, not knowing just how to begin such a meal. "How do you eat these? They 're hot."

"Sure 'nuff," said Philip. "I done forgot yo' was n't used to my sort o' eatin'. I jest cut off the end, drop a pinch o' salt in, and dig out the inside."

"Oh!" said Lily, hastening to follow his directions for herself. As for Bertie, he had already half eaten his potato without salt.

Philip now brought out a bowl and mixed up some corn-meal in it; then brushing off the hot griddle of his stove, he poured the mixture on. In a few minutes he turned it over with a knife, and in a short time he handed it in the same way onto a plate and put it on the table. It was brown and smelt good, and the hungry children eagerly devoured it, while Philip made another.

When they had eaten as much as they could,

and drank some water out of teacups, Philip gave Lily a seat on the soap-box, while he turned a big stick of wood up on end and sat down on that himself. He then took Bertie, who had got over his fright, onto his lap and proceeded to take off the soaked shoes and stockings and warm the little cold red feet. Lily meantime did the same for hers, which ached with the cold.

"Now tell me how yo' comed to run away," said Philip, when they were more comfortable.

"We came out to find the Christ Child," said Lily. "Barbara says he comes on Christmas eve down on a hill and gives the presents to Santa Claus; and we wanted to pick ours out."

"Yes, I want a horse 't I can ride," said Bertie, who had recovered his spirits, now that he was warm and fed.

"Pore little things!" said Philip compassionately. "Yo' mus' have had a dreffle tramp! I'll see how the weather is."

So he sat Bertie on the lounge-bed and went to the door. A fierce blast came in as he opened it, with a flurry of snow, nearly

putting out the light. He shut it quickly, and stood a few moments with a look of perplexity on his face.

"I 'll tell you what," he said at length, in answer to Lily's anxious look, "it 's teetotally umpossible to go through the woods to-night. I would n't 'tempt it in this yere storm myself, let alone toting two chillen. I'll fix yo' up as comf'able as I can hyere to-night, an' soon as it 's light I 'll go to the village an' tell y'r folks, an' they 'll come with a sleigh. There 's a wood-road round a little piece down here."

Bertie's lip went up for a cry; but Lily took him in her arms in a motherly way, and said: "Never mind, Bertie, dear; it 'll soon be morning, and we 'll go home in a sleigh, maybe. And then it 'll be Christmas, you know."

They talked a little more, and then Philip fixed a place for them to sleep. He shook up the bed till it was high and round, laid one blanket over it, put the now half-asleep children in it, and covered them up as snug as he could with the other blanket.

"'T ain't much of a cover to them, I reckon," said he to himself, "but I kin keep a fire all night, an' I don't suspicion they 'll get cold."

Having fixed them as nicely as he could, shaded his light so it would not shine in their eyes, and replenished his stove, old Philip sat down on his soap-box, and fell to talking to himself, as he often did out there in the woods, for want of other company.

"Pore creeturs!" he said, looking at the sleeping children. "What a marcy that they got sight o' my light. They 'd be done dead by this time. An' to think the little innocents come out this-a-way to find Santa Claus. Pore things! Little 'nuff Christmas they 'll have, I 'se a thinkin'. I wonder what they 'r a-doing down to their house. Tearin' round fit to kill, I reckon. They 'r somebody's darlin's I see plain 'nuff. Won't they be powerful glad to see this nigga in the mornin'? Yah! yah!" he laughed softly to himself. "I reckon they never so glad to see this chile afore. Pore things!" he went on after a little, "come out

yere to see Santa Claus an' get some presents. Golly!" he exclaimed, as a new thought struck him. "I wonder if I could n't hunt up somethin' 'r other to make a Christmas mornin' bright. They 'll be powerful forlorn when they wakes up."

He was silent some time, scratched his head, whistled a little; and after a while he got up softly and hung their stockings up to dry. "I know what Ize gwine to do," he said. "I 'll give 'em some nuts and pop-corn, anyway."

He drew a box from under the foot of the bed, opened it, and took out some beechnuts — delicious little three-cornered things that he had gathered in the woods. From the same box he took two or three ears of small popping-corn. As he attempted to push it back it hit something, and he put in his hand and drew out a stick.

"Golly!" said he again, "if there ain't the very stick fur a hoss fur that boy, that he wants so bad. I did n't 'spect, when I done shoved it in under there fur a walking-stick, what I 'd want it fur."

It was a piece of a branch of a tree, and on one end it was bent over so as to make a natural sort of a handle. It would do very well for a horse's head, too. So Philip got out his old jack-knife, cut a sort of a mouth for the horse, dug holes in the bark to represent the eyes, made a sort of a bridle of string, whittled the end off smooth, and there was as fine a riding-horse as any boy of five could ask for.

"There," said Philip, "that 'll do fur the boy; now what kin I find fur the gal?" A long time he puzzled over this, till he remembered some birds' eggs that had been in his shanty for months. He took down the old coat that hung on the wall, and there they were, very dusty now, but not broken. Carefully he took them down and washed them clean, breaking one or two, but on the whole succeeding very well. Then he strung them on a clean string, and they looked very pretty indeed.

"Little curly head 'll like that 'ar, I know," said he, with a grin of pleasure on his black

face; "an I 'll learn her the name of every kind."

Next the droll old Santa Claus proceeded to prepare his pop-corn. He took out from some dark corner a sort of iron saucepan, and put it on the stove while he shelled the corn. When it was hot he dropped in the corn, covered it up, and began to shake it about, first slowly, and then faster and faster as the corn popped off in little explosions inside, every few seconds looking at the sleepers to see that they did n't wake up. They were far too tired to wake, and when he had poured the beautiful white shower out on the table they had not stirred once.

Then he went on to hang a stocking of each child on the wall near the bed; and then, tiptoeing around as though he were stepping on eggs, he went back and forth filling them. First down in the toe came beechnuts, filling all the foot; then popped corn stuffed the leg into a funny bunchy shape. Then over Lily's he hung the string of birds' eggs, and over Bertie's the comical horse.

All this work, varied by replenishing the fire, kept old Philip busy till nearly morning, and then he began to prepare breakfast. His potatoes were baked and his hoecakes mixed in the highest style of the art when Lily opened her eyes.

At first sight of Philip a look of fright came into her face, and then she remembered. "Oh!" said she, "I thought it was all a dream, and I was in my bed at home."

"But you is n't, honey. Yo 's my guest this blessed Christmas mornin'. Wish yo' Merry Christmas. How do yo' feel?"

"I feel well enough," said Lily, sitting up. "Is this Christmas, really?"

"Yes," said old Philip. "See your stocking hanging up thar?"

Lily looked around quickly. "Oh! what a lovely string of eggs. Oh! where did you get it? Is it for me?" burst out of her eager lips.

"Course it 's for yo'," said Philip, showing all his teeth. "Santa Claus mus' a know'd whar yo' was, an' done come down the chimbly an' leff it hyer fur yo'."

"Oh! Bertie, wake up!" cried Lily, shaking the sleepy boy. "It's Merry Christmas, and Santa Claus has been here."

Bertie was wide awake in a minute. "There's my horse," he shouted, as soon as he saw it. "Let me have a ride." And he snatched it down, got astride, and rode around the small room, perfectly happy.

"Let's see what else is in the stockings," said Lily, taking them down.

"Oh! pop-corn! Isn't it nice?" and they began to eat it at once.

"And what are these?" she asked, as she emptied the corn into her lap, and the nuts came down in a little brown shower.

"Le's see," said Philip, looking at them curiously, as though he had never seen them. "Why, them's beechnuts! Did n't you never see beechnuts afore? There's heaps in the woods."

"No, I never saw any," said Lily. "How do you open them?"

Philip showed her how to take out the delicate nut, and she declared it the most delicious

nut in the world. "Santa Claus made them purpose for us, I guess," she said.

It was some time before Philip could get them to have their stockings and shoes on and eat their breakfast. But he hurried them by reminding them how anxious their mother would be; and as soon as he had seen them fed he got ready for his journey.

It did not look very promising outside. The snow was a foot deep, though it had stopped falling, and he resolved to start.

"Now mind yo' don't set the house afire," he said, as he put on his buckskin mittens and buttoned his one coat up tight to his chin. "Don't let the fire go out, nuther, or you'll freeze."

"I'll tend to it," said Lily.

"Good-by. I'll hurry fast as ever I kin," said Philip, and went out and shut the door, leaving them alone. But not sad. Far from it; they were as merry over their rude Christmas presents as though they had a room full of toys.

And how do you suppose the night had

passed in the home of Lily and Bertie? Not so quietly as in the shanty in the woods. When their absence was discovered there was great excitement, deepening as the village was searched and no trace of them revealed, turning to horror as the storm came up and the hours went by and no children to be found, and settling into despair when the various parties who were out hunting returned with no trace. There was excitement all through the village; but in their home it was agony. The father spent the night in scouring the country, the mother in going from one fainting fit to another, till the doctor despaired of her life.

It was a welcome sound when old Philip's voice rang out at the door. "Done loss any chillen hyer?"

Mr. Deane, who had just returned, rushed out. "Yes. Do you bring any news?"

"Well, 'spects I does. Two chillen done spent the night in my cabin."

"Come in," cried the father, hastily drawing him in. "Where are they now? How

did you find them? Where is your house? Bless you, I 'll never forget this!" he poured out in a stream.

"One at a time, Massa," said old Philip, going up to the stove in the hall and spreading out his black hands to the pleasant warmth. "My shanty is over in the woods a piece — nigh on to two miles from here, I reckon. An' them two chillen sot out, nigh 's I kin make out, about sundown, to find Santa Claus. They see my light, an' come to my do' 'bout eight o'clock, I reckon, nigh about froze an' starved; the boy cryin', but the little gal brave an' peart to the last."

By the time the story was finished all the household had gathered around, and the father had Philip's rough hands in both of his. "Bless you, my man, I 'll pay you for this."

"No, you won't," said Philip. "I don't want no pay. But them young ones is alone in the shanty, an' they mowt set it afire, though I charged the little gal to look out."

"Is there a road? Can I get there with a sleigh?" asked Mr. Deane.

"You kin go purty nigh," said Philip.

"Well, you get warm and have some breakfast. Cook," turning to her, "give him the best you can in five minutes, while I see about the horses. You, Barbara, get cloaks and things."

Seated by the kitchen table, Philip disposed of a cup or two of hot coffee and some cold meat and bread in a few minutes, and when the sleigh came up to the door he came out.

"Have you no overcoat for this weather?" asked Mr. Deane, as he put on his own in the hall.

"No, sir," said Philip. "The wood-sawin' business is n't over 'n above good since so many burns coal. I has n't had an obercoat fur many a year."

Mr. Deane turned to the rack from which he had taken his. "Here 's one for you," he said, handing him a heavy overcoat.

Philip was overcome. Something choked him so that he could n't speak, but he speedily got into it and followed Mr. Deane out to the sleigh. He was already in, and he bade Philip get in by him, and they started off.

Of course, it did not take very long to reach the point nearest the shanty, though the road was not broken and it was rather hard pulling for the stout pair of horses.

When the father opened the door he found Bertie prancing around on his horse and Lily perfectly happy, studying out her birds' eggs.

"Oh! Papa," she exclaimed when she saw him, "Santa Claus came here and left us such beautiful things!"

"See my horse!" shouted Bertie. "Santa Claus bringed him!"

Mr. Deane looked around the room and understood the poverty of its owner, and a happy idea occurred to him.

"Philip," he said, "in the chamber of my barn is a comfortable room, built for a man, but my man don't occupy it. I'm going to have you move down there this very day and live in it. There's furniture enough about the house to make it comfortable, and I can find work enough for you to do all the year round. We burn lots of wood and have a garden in the summer; and, in fact, I take you into my

employment from this hour, at the best wages going, to last your life. You need n't say anything," as Philip struggled to speak. "I can never repay you for what you have done for me; but I'll do what I can. Now, if you 'll help me carry these little ones over to the sleigh, you shall have a team to come for your things."

Well, the children were soon in their mother's arms; and Mr. Deane, with the help of the whole household, spent the morning in furnishing up old Philip's room.

A very cosy place it was when all was ready: a carpet; a new little cooking-stove; a nice bed, made up with white sheets and things; a table, a chair or two, including one rocking-chair; a cupboard, containing dishes, tin, and ironware enough to set up a family; jars of sugar and tea and coffee and meal; and, in fact, everything the combined household could think of to add to the old man's comfort — not forgetting a goodly array of half-worn garments from the family storeroom.

And Philip! Well, he stood and looked at

it in silence, taking it in item by item, till he reached a picture which Lily had insisted on giving, hanging it up with her own hands, and then he just turned his face to the wall and covered it up with his hands.

And they all stole away and left him alone.

When Uncle Tom ended his story it was very still in the room for a minute; nobody seemed inclined to speak. At last Kristy cleared her throat and said:

"I knew you 'd tell a tip-top story, Uncle Tom. It 's lovely, and you must put it in a book for me."

"Humph!" said Uncle Tom. "We shall see, Miss Queeny! Your reign is over to-night. Now, Aunt Joe, it 's your chance," said he, turning mockingly upon his neighbor.

"Well," said Aunt Joe quietly, "the strangest Christmas doings I know of happened a good many years ago."

CHAPTER IV

HOW A BEAR BROUGHT CHRISTMAS

It 's a queer story, but if it had not been for a big black bear there would not have been any Christmas at all in that poor little log hut in the woods — I mean any Christmas doings, of course. You see the father had gone off to the village to get a bag of meal. He had been away three days, and there were no signs of his coming. It was Christmas eve, and the very last spoonful of meal was boiling in the kettle for supper. Every minute the children were looking out of the one little window to see if Father were coming, and Mother was getting the bowls ready, and the mush was nearly done, when suddenly a shout came from the window.

"O Mother! there 's a big black bear!"

Mrs. Carson glanced out of the window. Bears were not so rare as to be startling in

the woods; but with her husband away she felt nervous about everything.

Sure enough, there was a big bear, and what was worse he was plainly as much interested in them as they were in him. He was headed for the cabin, and shuffling along in a sort of trot, as if he had been invited to supper. Mrs. Carson turned pale.

"He looks hungry," she said, "and he 's coming straight here, as if he knew we were alone. Children! hurry up into the loft, while I fasten the door!"

The little ones, Carry and Jack, needed no further orders; they hastily scrambled up the ladder to where a few boards had been laid across the beams and formed a loft used for storing things when they had any to store.

Frank, however, demurred. "Mother! let me take Father's gun and shoot him out of the window?" he cried.

"No, indeed!" said his mother, as she barred up the door; "you 're not a good shot like your father, and a wounded bear is a terrible creature."

"He 's coming right here!" shouted Frank; "straight for the window! Run! run!"

Up the ladder he went, his mother after him, and when they turned and looked down, the bear was staring in at the window in a most neighborly way. He saw, or perhaps he smelled, the boiling mush, for he sniffed as if it pleased him, and made up his mind to come in.

Now, of course, he did n't understand glass, and thought that where he could look in he could go in; and, in fact, he could; for one thrust of his enormous paw smashed every pane of glass and the sash besides, and in he scrambled.

"O Mother!" whispered Frank, "bears can climb."

"Sh!" his mother replied in the same tone; "we must n't let him suspect we 're here."

The little ones were already speechless with terror.

But the bear paid no attention to whispering, if he heard it; he looked neither at the

ladder nor at the gun in the corner; he had eyes for only one thing — the kettle of boiling mush. He sniffed again, as if the odor were agreeable and mush his favorite food; and he shuffled straight across the room to the open fireplace where it hung. "He surely won't touch it so hot!" thought Mrs. Carson; but she did not know him. What could a bear out of the woods know about heat? He snatched the kettle, dragged it off the hook, held it in his arms, and thrust his nose into it.

A pang, and a low groan from above as the party in the loft saw their last chance of supper gone; but a howl of pain rose from the bear as his nose touched the boiling mass. He held on tighter; that was his way when anything hurt, to squeeze the life out of it. He clasped the kettle closer and closer to his breast, and louder and wilder grew his cries; but he never thought of giving up. He rolled on the floor with pain; still he held on to the kettle, and the mush poured out into his face and eyes, and in about two minutes

there was nothing but a black mass rolling around, knocking over the chairs, wild and blinded.

Now was Mrs. Carson's chance. The gun stood in a corner; she could use it. With white lips she bade the children keep still while she stole down the ladder, but Frank held her tightly.

"Mother! Mother!" he cried eagerly, "let me! I'm quicker 'n you! I'll bring the gun!"

She pushed him back. "Never! — if I — "

But Frank was quick and light; he slipped between the bars and dropped to the floor. Then a shriek came from his mother; but in an instant he had seized the gun and was halfway up the ladder again. How he got up he never knew, but in a moment he was safe in the loft, again looking down on that roaring and tumbling mass below.

"Oh, if your father were here!" came tremblingly from Mrs. Carson's white lips.

"I can shoot, Mother!" cried Frank, and shoot he did. He could not take much aim, of

course, but he shot at random. I spare you the particulars; it is enough that two or three shots put an end to the distress of the poor fellow on the floor, and when all was quiet the pale, trembling little group crept down the ladder. Frank, of course, was wild; he danced around the fallen foe.

"My first bear, Mother! and such a big one! won't Father be pleased! and now we can have a splendid supper! bear's meat 's tip-top! And, Mother," as a new thought struck him, "now we can have a Christmas! now, youngsters," — he turned to the little ones who sat on the lower rounds of the ladder ready to scamper up on the slightest movement of the big beast, — "now Santa Claus 'll come here sure."

"You said he did n't know the way out here," began Carry.

"Yes, I know I did; but this splendid fellow 'll show him the way — you 'll see!"

"But, Frank," said his mother, "I can't see myself what you can do; the skin is worth something, but out here in the woods there 's

no one to buy it, and to-morrow 's Christmas, you know."

"Yes; and to-morrow morning I 'll cut this fellow up. I 'll take off his coat to-night, — I know how, for Father taught me, — and I 'll pack him, or what we don't want ourselves, on to my big sled, and — "

"And drag it five miles to the village?" said his mother, with a faint smile.

"Yes, Mother; why not? And then I can hunt up Father, too."

"I don't believe you can do it, with such a load."

"Well, I know I can; and I 'll sell that skin and the meat, — Mr. Brown buys them, I know, — and I 'll — " and he nodded his head in a mysterious way toward the children.

"Now, Mother!" as he saw her lips open to reply, "please, please, let me have my way this time! I know I can do it, and besides," he said hesitatingly, "what did you say about 'trusting the Lord'? Can't you trust him to get me safe to the village?"

This was a home thrust, and Mrs. Carson

closed her mouth. Sure enough, she had talked about "trusting;" it was now time to trust.

Moreover, she was getting very anxious about her husband, who she knew would not have left them so long alone unless something had happened. So she went to work to patch up the window with a piece of white cloth tacked over it, the best she could do, and to make up the fire and restore the room to order, while Frank proceeded to his part of the work, taking off Master Bruin's warm thick overcoat, which he would not need any more.

Before long, too, a delicious fragrance filled the little log house, and if a bear had come along just then, he 'd have smelled something more savory than mush. It was quite late that night before Mrs. Carson and Frank were in bed, for it was a pretty big piece of work for a boy of twelve; but boys of that age can do a good many things when they happen to live in the woods and have a father to teach them.

With the first light the family were astir. Frank packed his long sled which was made

to drag wood to the house, and after an early breakfast wrapped himself up and started.

"Mind," said his mother, as she bade him good-by, "get Mr. Brown to bring you back if Father is n't ready to come, or if anything 's the matter. I shall be worried to death if you 're not home before dark."

"Don't you worry, Mother. It 's Christmas day and I 'm bound to be home. Carry and Jack, hang up your stockings before you go to bed, if I 'm not here! I 'm sure old Santa 'll be around," and off he went. Mrs. Carson watched him out of sight, and then turned with a sigh to her work in the house, for children must eat and work must go on, you know, whatever happens.

Frank started off bravely, though the load was heavy and the way was long, but how he would have got on, and whether he would ever have reached the village all by himself, nobody can tell; for when he got up onto the main road, and just as he was trying to persuade himself that his arms did n't ache the least bit, a man came along with a yoke of oxen

and an empty wood-sled. As soon as Frank saw him he knew him; he lived in the village, and no doubt was going right home, and, to tell you the truth, it took Frank about one minute to make a bargain with him to drag his load and him, and take part of the bear's meat in payment. When everything was arranged and Frank climbed up under the buffalo-robe beside the driver, he had to admit to himself that his arms were a little tired, and "How I wish Mother knew," he thought all the way.

Just before noon Frank and his sled were dropped before the door of Mr. Brown's store, and having paid for his passage, and feeling at least a foot taller than he did yesterday, he walked in.

"Mr. Brown," he said, trying to make his voice steady, — it did shake so, — "do you want to buy a bear skin, and some meat?"

"Why, bless me! it's Frank Carson!" said the good-natured storekeeper. "Where's your bear, sonny?"

"Out here," said Frank, trying very hard not to look proud.

Half a dozen men of the kind that always hang around a country store started up and rushed to the door.

"Well! the boy was n't lying," said one, surprised.

"Humph!" said Mr. Brown, "I knew that. He does n't come of that sort of stock. How 's your mother, boy?"

"Well," said Frank, "but can you tell me about Father?"

"Your father," said Mr. Brown, undoing the fastenings preparatory to spreading out the skin, "your father calculated to go home this very afternoon: he 's had a spell of sickness; has n't set up since the day he come. He 's been most wild about you all, and he 's upstairs in my store this identical minute. Why, what a big fellow!" he interrupted himself, "how did you get him?"

Then Frank had to tell the story of his capture while his audience laughed and thought it was the first time a bear had been caught in a mush-kettle trap.

In an hour more a very happy load set off

behind Mr. Brown's mule for the little log house. Mr. Carson, wrapped and bolstered up in a big chair, so that he would not get too tired, and Frank, with more money than he ever had in his life, and a big bundle besides — a very mysterious package that even his father did n't know about, and that Mr. Brown had helped him hide under the straw of the sleigh. Not least of all, there was a new sash for the window, and a board out of which to make a strong shutter, so that the next hungry bear that chose to come smelling around after their mush might not find it quite so easy to get in.

"Though I 'm mighty glad he did get in, Father," said Frank.

"Yes, since it ended well," said his father. "But suppose it had been night." And he shuddered at the thought of what might have been.

It was after dark when the little light of the log house was seen, and the children were fast asleep. After having some supper and much talk on both sides, Frank begged his father and mother to go to bed and let him play Santa

Claus. They were very willing, and thus it was done.

The next morning there was almost as much noise in the house as when that bear was hugging the mush-kettle. Two wilder or happier children could not be found anywhere. Their stockings were full and running over, and besides there was a nice warm dress for Mother and a subscription to a weekly paper for Father; and all the rest of the money handed to Mrs. Carson with, "There, Mother! I've had all the fun I want out of that bear. You may have the rest. But aren't you glad he came to see us, anyway?"

"But where is your present?" said Mother. "What did you get for yourself?"

"Oh, Mother! I didn't think anything about it," said Frank.

"But I thought of it," said his father; and then he brought out of the folds of Mr. Brown's big cloak that he had been wrapped up in to take his long ride the day before, the prettiest, neatest, brightest, best little gun you ever saw.

What did Frank say?

Well, his eyes grew big; he stared and gasped, but all he said was, —

"Oh, Father!"

"Now, Auntie," said Kristy with shining eyes, when the story ended, "you always told me you could n't tell stories."

"No more I can," said Aunt Joe.

"Well, we 'll see!" said Kristy threateningly. "I shall not forget this one, and you may as well rack your brains for more."

Aunt Joe laughed, and everybody turned to Cousin Harry, who sat next.

"My story," said he at once, "is about a great snowstorm. It happened away out on the prairies to a family I knew. Perhaps you remember them, Grandma. George Barnes was the man's name; they used to live near here."

"To be sure I do," said Grandma with interest; "what about them?"

CHAPTER V

CHRISTMAS UNDER THE SNOW

It was just before Christmas, and Mr. Barnes was starting for the nearest village. The family were out at the door to see him start, and give him the last charges.

"Don't forget the Christmas dinner, Papa," said Willie.

"'Specially the chickens for the pie!" put in Nora.

"An' the waisins," piped up little Tot, standing on tiptoe to give Papa a good-by kiss.

"I hate to have you go, George," said Mrs. Barnes anxiously. "It looks to me like a storm."

"Oh, I guess it won't be much," said Mr. Barnes lightly; "and the youngsters must have their Christmas dinner, you know."

"Well," said Mrs. Barnes, "remember this, George; if there is a bad storm don't try to

come back. Stay in the village till it is over. We can get along alone a few days, can't we, Willie?" turning to the boy, who was giving the last touches to the harness of old Tim, the horse.

"Oh, yes! Papa, I can take care of Mamma," said Willie earnestly.

"And get up the Christmas dinner out of nothing?" asked Papa, smiling.

"I don't know," said Willie, hesitating, as he remembered the proposed dinner, in which he felt a deep interest.

"What could you do for the chicken pie?" went on Papa with a roguish look in his eye, "or the plum-pudding?"

"Or the waisins!" broke in Tot anxiously.

"Tot has set her heart on the raisins," said Papa, tossing the small maiden up higher than his head, and dropping her all laughing on the doorstep, "and Tot shall have them sure, if Papa can find them in S——. Now good-by, all! Willie, remember to take care of Mamma, and I depend on you to get up a Christmas dinner if I don't get back. Now, wife, don't

worry!" were his last words as the faithful old horse started down the road.

Mrs. Barnes turned one more glance to the west, where a low, heavy bank of clouds was slowly rising, and went into the little house to attend to her morning duties.

"Willie," she said, when they were all in the snug little log cabin in which they lived, "I'm sure there's going to be a storm, and it may be snow. You had better prepare enough wood for two or three days; Nora will help bring it in."

"Me, too!" said grave little Tot.

"Yes, Tot may help too," said Mamma.

This simple little home was a busy place, and soon every one was hard at work. It was late in the afternoon before the pile of wood, which had been steadily growing all day, was high enough to satisfy Willie, for now there was no doubt about the coming storm, and it would probably bring snow; no one could guess how much, in that country of heavy storms.

"I wish the village was not so far off, so

that Papa could get back to-night," said Willie, as he came in with his last load.

Mrs. Barnes glanced out of the window. Broad scattering snowflakes were silently falling, the advance guard, she felt them to be, of a numerous host.

"So do I," she replied anxiously, "or that he did not have to come over that dreadful prairie where it is so easy to get lost."

"But old Tim knows the way, even in the dark," said Willie proudly. "I believe Tim knows more 'n some folks."

"No doubt he does, about the way home," said Mamma, "and we won't worry about Papa, but have our supper and go to bed. That 'll make the time seem short."

The meal was soon eaten and cleared away, the fire carefully covered up on the hearth, and the whole little family quietly in bed. Then the storm which had been making ready all day came down upon them in earnest. The bleak wind howled around the corners, the white flakes by millions and millions came with it, and hurled themselves upon that

house. In fact, that poor little cabin alone on the wide prairie seemed to be the object of their sport. They sifted through the cracks in the walls, around the windows, and under the door, and made pretty little drifts on the floor. They piled up against it outside, covered the steps, and then the door, and then the windows, and then the roof, and at last buried it completely out of sight under the soft white mass.

And all the time the mother and her three children lay snugly covered up in their beds fast asleep, and knew nothing about it.

The night passed away and morning came, but no light broke through the windows of the cabin. Mrs. Barnes woke at the usual time, but finding it still dark and perfectly quiet outside, she concluded that the storm was over, and with a sigh of relief turned over to sleep again. About eight o'clock, however, she could sleep no more, and became wide-awake enough to think the darkness strange. At that moment the clock struck, and the truth flashed over her.

Being buried under snow is no uncommon thing on the wide prairies, and since they had wood and corn-meal in plenty, she would not have been much alarmed if her husband had been home. But snow deep enough to bury them must cover up all landmarks, and she knew her husband would not rest till he had found them. To get lost on the trackless prairie was fearfully easy, and to suffer and die almost in sight of home was no unusual thing, and was her one dread in living there.

A few moments she lay quiet in bed, to calm herself and get control of her own anxieties before she spoke to the children.

"Willie!" she said at last, "are you awake?"

"Yes, Mamma," said Willie, "I've been awake ever so long; is n't it most morning?"

"Willie," said the mother quietly, "we must n't be frightened, but I think — I 'm afraid — we are snowed in."

Willie bounded to his feet and ran to the door.

"Don't open it!" said Mamma hastily, "the

snow may fall in. Light a candle and look out the windows."

In a moment the flickering rays of the candle fell upon the windows. Willie drew back the curtain. Snow was tightly banked up against it to the top.

"Why, Mamma!" he exclaimed, "so we are! and how can Papa find us? and what shall we do?"

"We must do the best we can," said Mamma, in a voice which she tried to make steady, "and trust that it is n't very deep, and that Tim and Papa will find us, and dig us out."

By this time the little girls were awake and inclined to be very much frightened, but Mamma was calm now, and Willie was brave and hopeful.

They all dressed, and Willie started the fire. The smoke refused to rise, but puffed out into the room, and Mrs. Barnes knew that if the chimney were closed they would probably suffocate, if they did not starve or freeze.

The smoke in a few moments choked them, and seeing that something must be done, she put the two girls, well wrapped in blankets, into the shed outside the back door, closed the door to keep out the smoke, and then went with Willie to the low attic where a scuttle door opened onto the roof.

"We must try," she said, "to get it open without letting in too much snow, and see if we can manage to clear the chimney."

"I can reach the chimney from the scuttle with a shovel," said Willie. "I often have with a stick."

After much labor, and several small avalanches of snow, the scuttle was opened far enough for Willie to stand on the top round of the short ladder, and beat a hole through to the light, which was only a foot above. He then shoveled off the top of the chimney, which was ornamented with a big round cushion of snow, and then by beating and shoveling he was able to clear the door, which he opened wide, and Mrs. Barnes came up on the ladder to look out. Dreary indeed was the

scene! Nothing but snow as far as the eye could reach, and flakes still falling, though lightly. The storm was evidently almost over, but the sky was gray and overcast.

They closed the door, went down, and soon had a fire, hoping that the smoke would guide somebody to them.

Breakfast was taken by candle-light, dinner — in time — in the same way, and supper passed with no sound from the outside world.

Many times Willie and Mamma went to the scuttle door to see if any one was in sight, but not a shadow broke the broad expanse of white over which toward night the sun shone. Of course there were no signs of the roads, for through so deep snow none could be broken, and until the sun and frost should form a crust on top there was little hope of their being reached.

The second morning broke, and Willie hurried up to his post of lookout the first thing. No person was in sight, but he found a light crust on the snow, and the first thing he noticed was a few half-starved birds trying in

vain to pick up something to eat. They looked weak and almost exhausted, and a thought struck Willie.

It was hard to keep up the courage of the little household. Nora had openly lamented that to-night was Christmas eve, and no Christmas dinner to be had. Tot had grown very tearful about her "waisins," and Mrs. Barnes, though she tried to keep up heart, had become very pale and silent.

Willie, though he felt unbounded faith in Papa, and especially in Tim, found it hard to suppress his own complaints when he remembered that Christmas would probably be passed in the same dismal way, with fears for Papa added to their own misery.

The wood too was getting low, and Mamma dared not let the fire go out, as that was the only sign of their existence to anybody; and though she did not speak of it, Willie knew too that they had not many candles, and in two days at farthest, they would be left in the dark.

The thought that struck Willie pleased him

greatly, and he was sure it would cheer up the rest. He made his plans, and went to work to carry them out without saying anything about it.

He brought out of a corner of the attic an old box-trap he had used in the summer to catch birds and small animals, set it carefully on the snow, and scattered crumbs of corn-bread to attract the birds.

In half an hour he went up again, and found to his delight that he had caught bigger game — a poor rabbit which had come from no one knows where over the crust to find food.

This gave Willie a new idea: they could have their Christmas dinner after all; rabbits made very nice pies. Poor Bunny was quietly laid to rest, and the trap set again. This time another rabbit was caught, perhaps the mate of the first. This was the last of the rabbits, but the next catch was a couple of snow-birds. These Willie carefully placed in a corner of the attic, using the trap for a cage, and giving them plenty of food and water.

When the girls were fast asleep, with tears

on their cheeks for the dreadful Christmas they were going to have, Willie told Mamma about his plans. Mamma was pale and weak with anxiety, and his news first made her laugh and then cry. But after a few moments given to her long pent-up tears, she felt much better, and entered into his plans heartily.

The two captives up in the attic were to be Christmas presents to the girls, and the rabbits were to make the long-anticipated pie. As for plum-pudding, of course that could n't be thought of.

"But don't you think, Mamma," said Willie eagerly, "that you could make some sort of a cake out of meal, and would n't hickory-nuts be good in it? You know I have some left up in the attic, and I might crack them softly up there, and don't you think they would be good?" he concluded anxiously.

"Well, perhaps so," said Mamma, anxious to please him and help him in his generous plans. "I can try. If I only had some eggs! — but seems to me I have heard that snow beaten into cake would make it light — and

there 's snow enough, I 'm sure," she added with a faint smile, the first Willie had seen for three days.

The smile alone he felt to be a great achievement, and he crept carefully up the ladder, cracked the nuts to the last one, brought them down, and Mamma picked the meats out while he dressed the two rabbits which had come so opportunely to be their Christmas dinner.

"Wish you Merry Christmas!" he called out to Nora and Tot when they waked. "See what Santa Claus has brought you!"

Before they had time to remember what a sorry Christmas it was to be they received their presents, a live bird for each, a bird that was never to be kept in a cage, but fly about the house till summer came, and then to go away if it wished.

Pets were scarce on the prairie, and the girls were delighted. Nothing Papa could have brought would have given them so much happiness.

They thought no more of the dinner, but hurried to dress themselves and feed the birds,

which were quite tame from hunger and weakness. But after a while they saw preparations for dinner, too. Mamma made a crust and lined a deep dish — the chicken-pie dish; and then she brought a mysterious something out of the cupboard, all cut up so that it looked as if it might be chicken, and put it in the dish with other things, and then she tucked them all under a thick crust, and set it down in a tin oven before the fire to bake. And that was not all. She got out some more corn-meal, and made a batter, and put in some sugar and something else which she slipped in from a bowl, and which looked in the batter something like raisins; and at the last moment Willie brought her a cup of snow, and she hastily beat it into the cake or pudding, whichever you might call it, while the children laughed at the idea of making a cake out of snow. This went into the same oven, and pretty soon it rose up light and showed a beautiful brown crust, while the pie was steaming through little fork-holes on top, and sending out most delicious odors.

At the last minute, when the table was set and everything ready to come up, Willie ran up to look out of the scuttle, as he had every hour of daylight since they were buried. In a moment came a wild shout down the ladder.

"They 're coming! Hurrah for old Tim!"

Mamma rushed up and looked out, and saw — to be sure — old Tim, slowly coming along over the crust, drawing after him a wood-sled on which were two men.

"It 's Papa!" shouted Willie, waving his arms to attract their attention.

"Willie!" came back over the snow in tones of agony. "Is that you? Are all well?"

"All well!" shouted Willie, "and just going to have our Christmas dinner."

"Dinner?" echoed Papa, who was now nearer. "Where is the house, then?"

"Oh, down here!" said Willie, "under the snow; but we 're all right, only we must n't let the plum-pudding spoil."

Looking into the attic, Willie found that Mamma had fainted away, and this news

brought to her aid Papa and the other man, who proved to be a good friend who had come to help.

Tim was tied to the chimney, whose thread of smoke had guided them home, and all went down into the dark room. Mrs. Barnes soon recovered, and while Willie dished up the smoking dinner, stories were told on both sides.

Mr. Barnes had been trying to get through the snow and to find them all the time, but until the last night had made a stiff crust he had been unable to do so.

Then Mrs. Barnes told her story, winding up with the account of Willie's Christmas dinner. "And if it had n't been for his keeping up our hearts I don't know what would have become of us," she said at last.

"Well, my son," said Papa, "you did take care of Mamma, and get up a dinner out of nothing, sure enough; and now we 'll eat the dinner, which I 'm sure is delicious."

So it proved to be; even the cake or pudding, which Tot christened snow-pudding,

was voted very nice, and the hickory-nuts as good as raisins.

When they had finished Mr. Barnes brought in his packages, gave Tot and the rest some "sure-enough waisins," and added his Christmas presents to Willie's; but though all were overjoyed, nothing was quite so nice in their eyes as the two live birds.

After dinner the two men and Willie dug out passages from the doors, through the snow, which had wasted a good deal, uncovered the windows, and made a slanting way to his shed for old Tim. Then for two or three days Willie made tunnels and little rooms under the snow, and for two weeks, while the snow lasted, Nora and Tot had fine times in the little snow playhouses.

"Oh!" said Kristy with a sigh, after the clapping of hands that greeted the adventures of the Barnes family had ended, "how dreadful to be covered up with snow! That 's worse than your Christmas snowstorm, Grandma;

but I'm so glad they found them after all! and what a cute boy that Willie must be!"

"He is," said Cousin Harry; "and I'll tell you more about him some time. But now let us proceed with the programme."

"Oh, yes! it 's your turn, Aunt Lill," said Kristy.

"I shall tell a story that I heard from a Danish friend of mine," said Aunt Lill. "She was in it herself, but I shall not tell you which of the characters she was; you may guess."

CHAPTER VI

CAROL'S GOOD WILL

THE story begins on Christmas morning when Carol Cameron flung herself into a chair and impatiently muttered:

"I wish that thing would n't run in my head, 'Peace on earth; good will to men.' Humph! Precious little peace there is for me, with all these young ones to take care of; and as for good will,"—hesitating,—"as for good will," she went on defiantly, "I suppose my will 's as good as anybody's."

The words would seem to settle the matter, but it evidently did not stay settled; the thoughts went on, "Peace on earth; good will to men," still ringing through her head in the music of the old Christmas chant.

"I don't see how I can be expected to feel much good will, anyway," she mused, looking out of her window across miles and miles of

snow-covered prairie. "This year has n't held much good for me. First it took away my dear Mother, and then it brought me to this dreadful, dreadful prairie, with four children to care for. Oh! how could Father bring us here!" and her revery ended in a passionate burst of tears.

It was a dismal picture, looked at from that side alone, and the tears fell fast and hot. But the glorious words went chanting through her brain, with soothing effect, and when the tea hour arrived she was able to take her place opposite her father, looking only a little more sad than usual in those unhappy days.

The younger children glanced at her anxiously, for since Carol had been in Mother's place she had been a little exacting, as an elder sister sometimes will. It was plain that there was some great but suppressed excitement among them, and at last the father noticed it, and a question brought out the breathless announcement that "There is going to be a Christmas tree at the schoolhouse; the Sunday School teachers got it up; it is going

to be splendid; and everybody is invited; and every scholar will get something; and oh, Papa! may n't we go?" ended the eager chorus.

"Why, yes; I have no objection," answered grave Papa, "if Carol will go and take care of you."

All eyes turned to Carol, sitting, alas! so hopeless, at the tea-tray.

"No, indeed, I'll not!" came instantly to her lips; but the old chant, still ringing in her head, stopped it there. She hesitated. "Good will to men," went on the silent monitor.

"Please, Sissy!" whispered baby Grace, while the others, grown wise by the year's experience of Carol's "Don't tease," dared not open their lips.

Carol could not help a glance around that circle of eager faces, and with a sudden pang thought how little she had done to make them happy; how poorly she filled the "mother" place in their lives. But they waited, breathless, for her reply.

"I — I don't think it will be pleasant," she began.

"Oh, yes, it will!" burst out the chorus. "It 'll be lovely! and everybody 's going to get something."

"Everybody dit somesing!" echoed Grace.

"Good will to men," went on the silent chant, and "Dear me! how that does bother me!" in her thoughts was followed on her lips by a reluctant "Well, I suppose I 'll have to go, if you 're all so wild about it."

The happy chorus of "Goody! goody!" and the merry laughs and glad faces, as they hurried about getting ready, were so many separate pangs in Carol's heart; but she had promised, and Carol was a lady, and never broke her word.

An hour later saw them on their way, dancing and skipping with delight, while sad thoughts of last Christmas filled Carol's mind as she plodded through the snow, holding fast to Gracie's little hand.

Last year Mother had planned the tree, and though she had lain for weeks on her bed, her

own patient fingers had made the pretty decorations and the lovely presents. Carol's hands had dressed the tree, but Mother, on her lounge, had told her what to do. Mother, too, had taught her and the rest the good old chant, "Peace on earth; good will to men."

Just here, in her recollections of the past, they reached the door of the schoolhouse, which in that small, far-western town served for school all the week and for church on Sunday.

Leaving their wraps in the hall, they quickly joined the lively crowd within. The room had been cleared of desks and benches, brilliantly lighted with many candles around the walls, and in the middle, admired of all, stood the tree.

You will fancy a pretty evergreen tree, loaded with gifts and ornaments, twinkling with tiny lights, like a bit of fairyland to all children. Far other was the scene that met Carol's wide-open eyes; very different was this Christmas tree of the prairies.

It was a dead, leafless tree of the woods, hung with small round scalloped cakes of

maple sugar, festooned with strings of popped corn, and lighted with a ring of tallow candles set around it in the tub in which it stood. That was all. Such and so bare did it look to Carol, though the lively imagination of the children magnified it into something beautiful and rare, and the grown-ups who had worked hard to prepare it saw no fault in it.

"You poor things!" was the thought that rushed into Carol's head. "You think that a Christmas tree!" And a sudden feeling of pity came over her for people whose lives were so bare and hard that they knew no better Christmas tree than that.

It was her first kind feeling toward the plain, hard-working villagers, whom she had simply despised. It must have been the magic work of the old chant, for a thought sprang up in her mind on the instant, and grew with gourd-like speed. She had leisure to think her plan out, even there, for the people were somewhat shy of the still, proud girl, who had walked among them as a stranger for several months, showing her unhappy face only at

church and in the street. From one motherly old lady, however, she learned that no one in the village had ever seen a Christmas tree, but, reading about them, the teachers had thought one would be pleasant for the children, and so had imitated it, as they supposed. "And sure enough," thought Carol, in trying to account for the leafless object, "I don't know that the stories ever do speak of its being an evergreen tree."

At an early hour the merry company went home, each child happy with a cake of maple sugar and a string of popped corn, and soon all the Cameron children were dreaming of the delightful festival that we all know "comes but once a year."

Not so Carol. Having seen the last sleepy head on its pillow, she went to her own room, locked the door, and sat down before her trunk. Article after article she threw out, till she reached a large pasteboard box in the bottom, and this she opened.

What a glitter in that dull little room! How the dim candle-light flickered and flashed

back from gilt and silver, from tiny mirrors and colored glass balls! Carol's heart was full as she pondered over these relics of last Christmas, remembering the delightful evening, the beautiful tree, and above all, the dear, pale mother on her lounge, so interested and so happy as she directed the dressing of the tree.

"I must teach you, Carol," she had said that day, "for when I'm gone you'll have to be mother to the little ones." And Carol felt a sharp pang as she remembered once more this evening how far short she had come of filling their mother's place.

"Little did I think," poor Carol murmured, as one by one she took the treasures from the box, and looked fondly through her tears at each, "little did I think, when I packed them away, where they would next be used, on these terrible prairies, to amuse a pack of savages who never saw a tree; and I almost think," she went on, after a moment, "I don't believe, after all —"

She hesitated; for, strong and clear, almost as if sung by human lips, went that trouble-

some chant through her head, "Peace on earth; good will to men."

Once more she changed her mind. "Yes, I will too," she said bravely. "I'm ashamed of myself to have such selfish thoughts."

That night she lay awake and matured her plans, which were, as you have guessed, to show the children a real Christmas tree.

She had the decorations, to be sure, but she had no presents; worse, she had no candles; and, worst of all, no tree.

After much pondering, she remembered that she had a long-unused talent for making paper dolls and their dresses and belongings; also, she knew how to fashion funny little Quaker dolls, with hickory-nuts for heads. Pretty shell cushions came within her powers, and she thought, with pleasure that was half pain, of a box of scallop shells she had brought from the seashore two years before. This reminded her of a dainty shell picture-frame she once saw; and instantly came the memory of several photographs laid away in her desk that would be just the things to fill them.

"Lots of little things I can make for girls," she thought. "But what can I do for boys?"

Then she remembered the tops she had made for her brothers out of half a spool with a stick run through.

"They used to spin nicely," she thought; "and if I paint them they 'll look pretty."

Then balls occurred to her. She knew well how to make them — her mother taught her — of woolen yarn wound over a cork, and covered with crochet-work or with bits of colored leather.

"Then I can make splendid molasses candy," she added triumphantly, "and cunning little cakes that I used to cut out with a thimble for my dolls' parties."

For the candles, she suddenly remembered that Sarah, the faithful woman they had brought from their old home with them, made their candles by dipping, and the brilliant thought flashed over her that at one period of their growth they were very thin, no thicker than Christmas candles, and why could n't they be cut into short ones? They could, she

was sure — and Sarah was good nature itself. "And I 'm sure," thought Carol, "that she 'll do it if I ask her."

Now about the tree. That seemed almost hopeless in this treeless prairie ; but she knew that the northern horizon had a fringe of trees, several miles away, and she resolved to hope, at least, that among them were evergreens. Cautious inquiry, the next day, of a man who came to saw wood, drew out the fact that there were a few evergreens about ten miles off. Carol relied on her father to help her to that, and at once began her preparations.

She secured the help of her next younger sister, Jessie, by confiding a very little of her plan, and making her promise to keep it secret, and by the same means she interested her brother Harry, aged thirteen. A much greater part of her intentions — yet not all — she confided to faithful Sarah, who, pleased to see her so bright and interested, readily agreed to make the candles.

For one week that was a very busy household. Carol's fingers fairly flew, and balls and

tops and dolls and other little gifts accumulated very fast. Meanwhile, Harry whittled spools to a point, and made pegs to fit them, and Jessie made balls and other things, and both were devoured with curiosity to know what sister could possibly want of such queer things.

For a list of the village children, with names and ages, Carol depended on Sarah, who knew everybody and visited everywhere. There were not many, only twenty-five; but to get up a tree and a present for even twenty-five is something of an undertaking for one pair of hands, far from the region of shops of any sort. But Carol was resolved to have everything ready for New Year's day, and she worked as never before, hardly able to eat or sleep.

Two evenings before the day, she hurried the children off to bed, and then went down to her father in his own room. He — absorbed as he was in his own thoughts and work — had noticed with pleasure the difference in Carol's manner. No longer the un-

happy, sad face was seen, but cheerful smiles and even a gay laugh had once or twice rung upon his ear.

He was very willing to listen as she told him some of her arrangements, and her great desire to have an evergreen tree. He readily lent himself to her plan, already worked out, that he should get a certain wood-sled and horse, take Harry, and go and get her a tree, timing his return so as to enter the village after dark, that no one might see their load, for Carol wanted it to be a complete surprise.

The next morning, December 31, Mr. Cameron and Harry started off on the wood-sled, greatly to the amazement of the curious villagers, and an hour later Jessie and Sarah went around through the village and invited every child to a "Christmas tree," though it did come on New Year's evening.

After dark the tree arrived safely, and proved to be a very pretty one. Papa himself set it up in a tub in the parlor, and wedged it firmly with sticks of wood, while Harry

brought in great armfuls of moss, which he had gathered by Carol's directions.

The younger children were already asleep, and Harry and Jessie were allowed to help Carol build a sloping mound around the tub, and to cover it nicely with the moss, and then they were sent to bed.

Sarah had that day made the candles, which were now to be cut into four-inch lengths; and then Carol made her molasses candy. A pretty show it was when at last all was done, and spread out on a table to harden, in sticks and twists and rings and figure 8's and other shapes, all white and delicious.

Then several journeys were made to her room, and all the little gifts brought down; and when everything was safely in the parlor, — and it was very late at night, — the door was locked, and Carol, with the key in her pocket, went to bed.

Everybody in the house knew now that there was to be a Christmas tree. So no one was surprised that Carol spent nearly the whole day locked into the parlor, while Sarah

baked cakes and made ice cream, which Harry froze by shaking it an hour or more in a tin pail.

Meanwhile Carol had not forgotten the blessed chant which had wrought all these wonders. Several of the larger girls had met at her house and learned the chant, though they did not know what for; and now they were quite ready to do their part in leading it.

Seven o'clock was the countrified hour at which the children were invited to appear, and seven o'clock found every youngster of the village within the door. Then, to Carol's dismay, the parents began to arrive, with the universal apology, "We know we 're not invited, but we do want so much to see your tree, and we will only look on."

Who could refuse them? Not Carol, although dismayed to think of entertaining the whole town, and appalled to think how short would fall the cakes and cream.

However, a happier party never assembled; and finally, when the last taper was lighted, and the door into the parlor was thrown open,

the surprise and delight of every one was ample pay for her work.

The room was prettily decorated with evergreen, and the tree was to them like a glimpse of fairyland. Not only had they never seen, but they had never imagined so lovely a thing. As for the children, they were simply spellbound, till Carol arranged them in a circle around the tree, bade them join hands, and herself led them in their dance around, singing the dear old chant her mother had taught her.

Tears were in many eyes; and as for Mr. Cameron, Carol found him a half hour later, when he was wanted to distribute the little gifts, shut up in his room, actually weeping with mingled joy and pain.

"Now, Papa," she began; but he seized her in his arms.

"My dear daughter, you look and appear to-night so much like your blessed mother that I — that I am thus overcome."

Ah! don't you think that moment paid her, and completed the change the chant had begun?

When the marvelous tree had been sufficiently admired from every side, and all the candles were burnt out, and everybody had eaten a piece of cake and a small dish of cream, — which did go around, though not so generously as Carol had intended for the children alone, — Papa had recovered himself, and gradually dismantled the tree.

The surprise and wild delight of the children when they found that the pretty toys were for them, that not one was forgotten, and the gratitude and joy with which they hugged their paper dolls and spool tops, and daubed themselves with delicious molasses candy, would be a lesson to those who have dozens of presents every year, and then sometimes grumble, and it all made for Carol the very happiest Christmas she had ever known, though she received not one present, and had worked for a week harder than ever in her life before.

"Oh dear!" said Kristy, "what lovely things people do — in the story books."

"But this was in real life, as I told you,

Kristy," said Aunt Lill. "It 's all true except the name."

"Then her name was n't Carol Cameron at all," said Kristy.

"No; of course her name was Danish."

"Ah! now we 've caught you!" cried Kristy. "Your Danish friend was the heroine!"

Everybody laughed, and Aunt Lill said, "You 're getting well, Miss Kristy; you 're too sharp for me."

"You 're too sharp for me, too," said Mr. Coles, the new minister, whose seat was next; "to invite me to a party and entrap me into telling a story."

"But it 's easy for you," said Kristy. "I 've heard you tell lots of stories — in the pulpit, you know," she added, as he seemed surprised. Then everybody laughed, and Mr. Coles flushed a little, but in a moment he said:

"Well, I shall punish you for that, Miss Kristy, by telling a story of the most unpleasant place I ever saw, a rag-man's home in New York City."

"Oh! oh!" exclaimed Kristy in dismay. "Can't you think of a pleasanter one?"

"No," said Mr. Coles firmly, but with a twinkle in his eye, "it 's that or nothing. Shall I tell you about the ash-barrel girl, or will you let me off?"

"I can't let you off, you know," hesitated Kristy, "but — what is an ash-barrel girl, anyway?"

CHAPTER VII

OUT OF AN ASH-BARREL

It was ash-barrel day in Barclay Street one pleasant morning in May, and every shop on the street had decorated the walk in front of its door with a barrel or box of rubbish ready for the "ashmen" to empty and carry away.

Long before the expected carts came lumbering around the corner there appeared on the scene a young girl. She was not very attractive: barefooted, ragged, and dirty; a shawl tied over her tangled black hair, and a hard, saucy look in her face. In her hand she carried a long iron, hooked at the end, and over her shoulder a coarse bag; the former she thrust into each barrel as she came to it, and anything she dragged up that could be sold she stuffed into the bag to carry away. In this way she had already collected half a bushel of old paper, rags, bones, bottles, and

other stuff you would not consider of the least value.

She was well known on the street, for many a spruce clerk standing in the door spoke jeeringly to her, and none failed to get a sharp reply, with generally an ugly grimace, which always caused a coarse laugh and more talk. Bad-tempered, ready to "talk back," even to scratch and bite if interfered with, Val, the ash-barrel girl, seems a strange character for a story. But this is n't the end, you know, it 's only the beginning.

The first poke of her hook in a barrel before a large china store uncovered a very unusual object — a doll's head. A look of surprise came into her large black eyes, next a quick glance around to see if any one was looking, and then a sudden disappearance of the treasure into her pocket.

She hurried through the rest of the barrels in the row, and passed down the street toward the river, thinking of a hiding-place she knew. It was a corner formed by a pile of lumber on the end of a pier in the North River, — so

small and so hard to reach that few knew of it, — where she often spent a quiet half hour, sure of not being ordered away by policeman or workman, looking at the river and the boats, thinking hard thoughts of her hated life, and dreaming of plans to run away. For she could remember when things were very different — a sweet-faced mother who talked another language, and called her Violetta; clean clothes, enough to eat, and a decent home. That was two or three years ago, before her mother was carried to a hospital and never came back, and she had to poke over ash-barrels to keep from starving.

This morning, as I said, she finished her task, and hastened to her private nook. Safely she slipped through the entrance and past the policeman, quickly ran across the narrow plank over the water, seized the end of a projecting board, swung herself around the corner of the pile, at the great risk of falling into the river, and then sat down in her retreat.

The moment she was safe she drew from her pocket the treasure she had found, and

examined it at her leisure. It was a very pretty head of bisque, with a sweet face, blue eyes, and head covered with short real curls of blond color. It was not soiled, being protected by the straw it had been packed in, and was not injured in the least, except — it was broken short off at the neck.

This, of course, unfitted it to be sold; but this had given it to Val, and she did not consider it. She was lost in the beauty of the face, and her feeling of unexpected wealth. This was her very own! You who have dolls and friends in plenty cannot imagine the joy this poor doll's head gave the lonely little ash-barrel girl.

No one should ever see this treasure. It should have a body and a dress. Val could n't yet think how, but she was sure she could contrive it. It should have a name too — hers — the prettiest she knew. It should be Violetta. "Val's good enough for me!" she said, scorning her own shabby clothes and soiled hands.

Some time passed in dreaming and planning

before Val remembered that she must go back, or the master for whom she worked would wonder where she had been, and perhaps suspect she had found something; he always did suspect that, and was very severe. Slowly, and after a long, lingering look, she hid her treasure away in her pocket, took up her bag, and retraced her steps.

She passed through several streets, and at last turned into a narrow alley between two tall, tumble-down houses. The alley ended, in the middle of the block, in a small court, paved over, and half filled with rubbish of all sorts. Into this court opened several wretched buildings, and every building had dozens of inhabitants. Even on this fresh May day, so clear and breezy outside, the air was heavy with bad odors, and noisy with voices of children.

Val hurried across the court, and entered the door of what she called her home. It was a rather large room, the greater part occupied with the contents of the bags brought in by the dozen or more boys and girls who worked

for the owner. The bags had to be emptied, and the contents sorted into piles, each kind by itself, ready to be taken out and sold.

This was all that Val had of home and comfort. Was it any wonder that, as soon as the day's tasks were over and she had devoured her share of the poor food, she should go back into the street to wander about, to steal if she had a chance, to sit on sunny doorsteps, hang around shop windows, and try in every way desperation could suggest to add some pleasure to life?

One side of an old pile of rags in a corner of the room Val called hers, and had established her claim by many fights and hard words. Under this was her only hiding-place, and here was carefully concealed the doll's head.

As she had chance, when no one was in the room, Val arranged a body by making a hard roll of a tolerably clean piece of muslin she had found, and stuffing one end into the open neck of her treasure. No arms or legs, even

no shoulders, had this queer doll, yet Val was delighted when she had accomplished so much as that.

The next thing was a dress. Now Val had one piece of finery, found in an ash-barrel before a grand house up-town. It was a lady's silk apron, soiled and worn, having probably descended from the parlor to the kitchen, and at last to the ash-barrel. It was soiled, to be sure, but it was soft in texture and rich in color, and it was lavishly trimmed with ruffles. Often at night, when all were asleep, and the moon or the street-lamp made a little light in the room, Val had drawn this treasure from its hiding-place, stroked it and admired it, tried it on, and dreamed of the day she longed for, when she should dare to wear anything so elegant. Now, however, that she had her dear Violetta to dress, she remembered the apron, and decided that the doll, and not she, should wear it.

She waited impatiently for Sunday, when, work being stopped because of the city laws and the police, all went out and spent the day

where it pleased them — on the docks or on the streets, mission schools not having yet penetrated the court. Val had been used to spend much of her Sunday, when the weather was fine, in the nook behind the lumber, but this day she stayed at home and dressed her precious doll. She had no needles or thread, or scissors with which to cut and fashion her dress, even if she had known how to do so, but she had plenty of pins which she had picked up. With these she arranged the little apron into a dress, finishing the whole by tying the ribbon-strings around the waist to form a sash.

No French doll of the most elegant sort, with dresses and jewels by the trunkful, ever gave so much pleasure, I am sure, as this one poor little head, dressed in an old silk apron.

Val was in ecstasies. She could not take her eyes off the beautiful creature, and she felt as happy as if she had found a friend. She set her upon a broken chair before her, called her Violetta, and talked to her in the language her mother had talked — Italian.

That hour the poor ash-barrel girl was more happy than any queen, for she forgot her dismal surroundings, her hard life, her cruel master, her always yearning hunger, while her eyes grew soft and her heart warm with real love for her treasure.

Now, "Old Rags" — as her master was called in the court — was very well-to-do for a resident in that place; and though hard in general, he had one soft spot in his heart. That was for his daughter Mina, who was a cripple and a great sufferer: it was said on account of her father's brutal treatment when young.

However that may be, he was very gentle to her now, and had another room than the one Val lived in, on purpose for her. This room, furnished decently, though very poorly, was to Val a picture of comfort. It had chairs that could be used, a real bed with pillows and cover, a table with whole dishes to eat from. Into this room Val had often looked with envy of the poor girl lying there. She envied her pleasant room, her decent clothes, enough to

eat, her easy life because she did not have to poke over ash-barrels.

A day or two after she had completed the dressing of Violetta, and while her heart was still full of happiness, Val had occasion to pass the door of Mina's room. It was a little open, and looking in, as she always did, she caught sight of the child on her bed, her face white and drawn with pain. This was nothing new, but Val's eyes fell upon a doll which was evidently carefully cherished by the little invalid. It was of rags rolled into a bundle, and dressed in a piece of faded calico simply pinned around it like a shawl.

In an instant Val thought of Violetta, so much more beautiful, and this thought softening her heart, she was seized with the first feeling of pity she had ever felt for Mina. "How she would love Violetta!" came like a flash into her mind, instantly followed by the thought, "But I won't give her away."

She went back to the other room, but somehow she could not get that suffering child out of her mind; nor could she put away the

thought of the happiness Violetta would bring to her. For the first time she realized what it must be to be shut up all the time; suffering, too, — with no fresh, sweet air as Val could get when she went down to the water; no cool sea breeze; no warm sunshine; no pretty shop-windows to look into and think what you would have if you could choose; not one of the pleasant things that even an ash-barrel girl could have.

"But she does n't have to carry an old bag, and poke in the dirt," Val said to herself, angry that she should pity one so much better off than she. "Though I 'd rather do that than never go out," she could n't help thinking. "And then she has good dresses to wear and enough to eat," came to her from the other side. "But she is in pain all the time, and often can't eat a bit," was the answering thought.

So the battle went on in Val's heart: the pity she could not drive away, against the hard envy she had always felt. Then, too, when the pity would get the advantage it always sug-

gested that Val should give her the doll. That was the point to which the struggle always came around.

Several days passed, and the next Sunday came before Val had fought the battle out for herself; but at last pity conquered, and she resolved to give her only treasure to one who needed it more than she. On this day, therefore, after everybody had gone out, Val, taking a passionate leave of Violetta, hid her in a fold of her dress, and went to Mina's door.

The poor child lay, as usual, on her little bed. Val walked in, and, without a word, held up Violetta.

"See my doll!" she said, in a moment, shortly.

Mina's eyes opened wide with surprise and admiration. "Oh, how sweet! Where did you get her?" she gasped.

"Found her head; dressed her myself," said Val briefly.

"I never saw one so pretty," said Mina. "May I take her a minute? I'll be just as careful."

"You may have her to keep!" shouted out Val, handing her over.

Mina's amazement almost struck her dumb. That any one should give away such a treasure was beyond her understanding.

"To keep?"

"F'rever 'n ever," said Val bravely, though the words seemed to choke her.

"Oh!" was all the poor girl could say in her emotion, and Val bolted out of the room, rushed down-stairs, and threw herself on the pile of rags, feeling more desolate than ever.

Not that she wished to take back the gift, but it was a wrench to her very heart-strings. It was as if you were giving up everything nice and pretty you have in the world.

"Never mind!" she said to herself, "I can go out, and she can't. Maybe I 'll find another head — and another apron," she added, more slowly; "though I most know I shan't."

In spite of her pain at the loss of Violetta, Val was surprised to find a strange new feeling about her heart, a sort of warmth unusual to her. She began to feel an interest in Mina,

a constant wish to do something for her. She began to hang around her door, partly to see the doll, which was cherished to her heart's content, and partly to try to do something for Mina. Now she began to notice Mina's neatness, and her own dirty hands.

"It 's no use," she said desperately, the first time she thought of this; yet, all the same, the next day she joined the throng of girls who went to the free bath-houses — a crowd she had often laughed at. Now, however, she heartily enjoyed a good scrubbing, and came out greatly improved in looks as well as feeling.

I do not mean to go on, step by step, and tell you how, very gradually, Val, the ash-barrel girl, changed from the day she made the great sacrifice. She stayed more with Mina, and grew ashamed of rough talk and rude ways. To her surprise, although her work was as dirty and unpleasant as before, although she had no better food, and no more attractive surroundings, she somehow found the bitterness and hardness taken out of her thoughts. She acquired the habit of saving

for Mina every nice thing she found, which heretofore she had hastily eaten herself — a good half of a discarded banana, a fair cherry or two in a lot thrown away, a sound "bite" in a decayed apple. Everything found its way to the sick girl, and while, strangely enough (as it seemed to her), making Val herself happier, gave new pleasures to the last few months of Mina's life, for before cold weather came again the little sufferer was released from all pain.

If you have ever visited a spot where the graves of the poor, among foreigners, are made, you have doubtless seen the small glass cases or houses erected over the resting-places of children, containing their playthings and precious possessions — a broken doll, a battered cup, a tin horse, etc. In like manner, over the lowly bed of Mina, her father placed a small house of glass, and in it — Violetta!

No one asked Val to go to the small funeral of the child, but she heard something said about "Calvary Cemetery," and the first Sunday she could inquire the way there she walked

out — several miles — and, to her own surprise, found the last resting-place of her only friend, by help of Violetta, who sat like a queen in her house of glass.

And now the doll from the ash-barrel did her one more good turn — the last; for the hopeless, friendless look of the girl attracted the notice of a lady interested in the charitable schools of the city.

Inquiring about her, and learning her friendless condition and her desire to improve, the lady placed her in an industrial school, where she was taught to read and write, decent ways of life, and a work that would take care of her.

The last time I saw Val she was dressed in a pretty calico dress, with a long white apron, and a tiny cap on her head, wheeling a baby carriage: a most trusty looking nurse-girl, well-fed and happy.

"That was n't so bad, after all," said Kristy. "I shall not be afraid of you again, Mr. Coles; but it 's dreadful to think of those poor girls

in the city. I wish I could give every one a doll."

"The only story I know about Christmas," said Mrs. Carnes, whose turn came next, "is something that happened in a little village in Maine, near enough to Canada to have caught the fashion of using toboggans."

"Toboggans are lovely," said Kristy with a sigh.

"Yes, we all know about these curious sleds now, but at the time of my story they were never seen out of Canada and its borders."

CHAPTER VIII

HOW A TOBOGGAN BROUGHT FORTUNE

THE story begins with a cold Christmas morning when a certain Mr. Clark was starting to go to the village, and turning in the doorway, said: "You children might go out and play with the toboggan a little, while I 'm gone, if you like. It 's a fine sunny morning, and you have n't been out lately."

"Oh, yes! let 's," shouted Willy, dancing about. "Will you, Essey?"

A pale, thin girl of perhaps ten years looked up from the stocking she was trying to darn.

"Yes, if you want to," she said quietly, though it was plain she cared nothing for it herself.

"Have you clothes enough left to wrap up warmly?" asked their father, looking anxiously at Esther.

"Yes, Father, I think so; and we can come in if we get cold," she answered.

Mr. Clark closed the door, and brought from the woodshed the article he had named, set it before the door, and started for town.

Esther put away her work and brought out a curious pile of wraps to put around them, and they were soon out on the hill.

Willy was carefully placed in front, and then the old-fashioned little woman took her seat with the ropes in hand for the ride. The snow was just right, the toboggan flew down the hill, and Willy shouted with delight. Esther dragged it up again and again, and again they rode down.

In her enjoyment of Willy's pleasure Esther almost forgot her thin clothes and her worn shoes, but when they started down on the last slide, she was almost numb with cold. No doubt it was that which made her lose control of the toboggan, and let it shoot out one side, as it did. It ran plump against a half-covered log, took a flying leap through the air, burst open a door, and landed them

square in the middle of Miss Harper's prim kitchen, terrified half out of their wits, and the toboggan a wreck.

Now I must tell you about Miss Harper. She was a tall, elderly woman with thin gray hair, and eyes so sharp they seemed to fairly look through one. Her cottage at the foot of the hill was as neat as wax inside and out, and always looked as though it had just been washed. In the summer she had a nice old-fashioned garden, with hollyhocks, larkspur, and sweet, fragrant pinks, where never a weed showed its head, or at least not an instant after Miss Harper's eyes spied it.

When the Clark children came to live in the tumble-down house at the top of the hill it was summer, and the garden was blooming. They had always lived in the city, and to their eyes it was a bit of fairyland, and they never tired of looking through the fence and admiring, though not for an instant did they dream of touching a flower.

But, unfortunately, Miss Harper had been much annoyed by her young neighbors, who

delighted — as bad boys will — in tormenting her by throwing open the gate, pulling off the flowers they could reach, and doing other equally rude and ill-bred tricks.

So, as the years went on, she had grown cross and bitter, not only against the boys themselves, but the dreadful disease spread, — as it will if one lets it, — till she grew cross and bitter against everybody. One after another her friends were driven away from her, and now, at last, in her old age, she lived alone, no one loving her, or caring how she fared. The boys called her "Old-witch Harper," and not a friend entered her door from one year's end to another.

This was a dreadful life, and she might have lived and died so, if it had n't been for the toboggan and Esther's cold fingers.

Miss Harper's usual seat was by a window looking into the garden, and the first time Esther and Willy stopped to admire the flowers the door suddenly burst open and the old woman hobbled out, shaking a stick and shouting harshly, "Go 'way! go 'way! No boys

allowed here!" Willy screamed, and Esther seized his hand and ran home as fast as her feet could carry her.

When the father came home the story was repeated, and he told them that poor Miss Harper was a lonely, sad old woman, and would not touch them if they did not meddle with her. So they learned to only glance at the lovely flowers, and never to linger, and though they often saw her great silver-rimmed spectacles turned towards them, she did not speak to them again. But none the less she was the great bugbear and dread of their lives.

What, then, was their horror, on the day my story begins, to find themselves, not only in the dreaded woman's own house, but with a terrible litter of snow and a wrecked toboggan and a broken door! Willy lay white and still where he had fallen, but Esther gave a shriek of terror.

Miss Harper had jumped up full of rage, but the look of deadly fright on Esther's face changed it to something almost like pity.

"Hush up!" she said bluntly, "I shan't eat ye!"

"Oh, please, Miss Harper!" Esther faltered, "we did n't mean to! I don't know how it happened!"

"I do," interrupted Miss Harper grimly, beginning to gather up the bits of broken wood. "I do — you ran into the old log that John Wilson ought to 've carted away years ago, an' left there just to spite me. I 'll have the law on him, too," she muttered, bustling about for a broom to brush out the snow before it began to melt.

"Here 's a pretty to do! door broken, house all littered up, an' a child — why don't ye pick the boy up?" she interrupted herself to say.

Esther stared like one dazed, and, in fact, she was so stiff with cold that she could hardly move, but now she turned to Willy, who had not stirred.

"Willy! Willy!" she whispered, trying to lift him up, "get up! We must go home! Are you hurt?"

Willy did not open his eyes nor move, and a great fear seized her.

"Oh, I'm afraid he 's killed! Willy! Willy!" she cried desperately.

Miss Harper dropped her broom and came to him.

"He 's in a faint," she said, a little less harshly. "We must get him on to the lounge, and he 'll get over it in a minute."

They took hold of him to lift him, but a groan showed that movement hurt him, and they left him on the floor. Even Miss Harper was alarmed now, and as for Esther, she turned as white as Willy himself.

"Don't ye go to faint, girl!" said Miss Harper. "I don't want two on my hands. Go up home and call your father."

"Oh, he 's gone to town!" wailed Esther.

"An' left you two babies alone?" said Miss Harper crossly.

"Oh, I 'm not a baby — I 'm quite a woman, Papa says," sobbed Esther. "I do everything most — and he has to go away or we would n't have anything to eat," she went on, letting

out the sad story of their needs, in her anxiety to prove that her father was not unkind.

"Humph! I thought as much!" said Miss Harper, relenting a little; "but we must have some one here. Do you know where the doctor lives?"

"Oh, yes," said Esther eagerly; "he used to come and see Mamma before we moved up here."

"Well, then, you run for him, and tell him to come right off."

"But if Willy should wake up?" Esther hesitated.

"He won't; an' I should n't eat him if he did. No words, child! go on," and Miss Harper fairly pushed her out of the door.

"The boy 'll die before they get here, I 'm afraid," she muttered to herself. "It 's just my luck to have such a hurly-burly in my house."

She had hardly got her room into its usual order when the door opened and Esther came in with good Dr. S., whom she had found on the street, just ready to start out. He well

remembered her mother, who had died while the family were strangers in the country, and he knew of the misfortunes which had brought them to sudden poverty. He hastened to help the child.

He found that Willy was very badly hurt, and perhaps would never be able to walk again; but at any rate it was not safe to move him now. Yet what could be done?

Miss Harper, who was looking at him closely, saw that he was puzzled, and asked in her blunt way, "What is it, Dr. S.?"

The doctor glanced around and saw that Esther had run home, hoping to find that her father had returned, before he answered her as plainly, "It will be sure death to move the boy."

Miss Harper's mouth opened to speak, but he went on boldly, for he had known her when she was a young girl, and he knew there was a heart under the crust:

"Mary Harper, you are well able to befriend these unfortunate babies, who are fairly thrown into your house, and you dare not refuse the

trust as you hope for mercy in your sorest need."

"I'm not a wild beast," she retorted angrily; "of course I expect to have the young one stay here till he's able to be moved."

So that was settled.

"Where shall he be put?" asked Dr. S., who knew her too well to express any thanks.

She hesitated an instant. Opening out of her kitchen, which was also sitting-room, and next to her own chamber, was a pleasant airy room which she kept in the most exquisite order, and called her guest chamber, though not for many years had a guest slept there. One pang she suffered at thought of a boy within its sacred walls, but a glance at the wide blue eyes of the sufferer decided her.

"In here," she answered shortly, throwing open the door.

The bed was prepared, the blinds thrown open to let in the sunlight, and in half an hour Willy lay in a faint again on the snowy pillows, almost as white as they.

The doctor had given his last directions,

and turned to go. At the door he met Esther and the father with a face of agony.

"Mr. Clark," said the doctor kindly, "Willy is badly hurt, but I hope not permanently. Miss Harper is going to nurse him, and I shall take him into my care till he is well again."

Mr. Clark could not speak, and the doctor went on.

"Esther, you 'll be a little woman now, I know — as you always are. You can be a great help to Miss Harper."

"O doctor! can't I take care of Willy?" sobbed Esther. "You know I can be careful."

"Yes, I know," said the doctor, "but he needs an experienced nurse, and there is none better, or kinder" — he added, seeing her fear and dread — "than Miss Harper. So you must be brave, and do just what she tells you."

"Oh, I will!" answered Esther, choking back her tears.

Miss Harper was not cross all the way through. Under the crust she had a kind

heart, and now she was really almost glad of a change in her lonely life. She did not know it; she thought it was a great trial, and a terrible bother, but she bustled about, making a bowl of gruel, preparing the medicine, and putting her precious "spare room" into sick-room order, more briskly than she had done anything for months.

Now a new life began in the cottage. The doctor came every day, and for some time they thought Willy would die. But he slowly grew better, and before spring he was out of danger of that, but still had to lie on the bed or lounge all the time, suffering much, and would probably have to lie a year or more before he could hope to put his once active little feet to the ground.

From the first moment Esther had made herself the most devoted slave to Miss Harper. Before she asked for anything, almost before she thought of it, it was ready to her hand. The fire was made, the rooms dusted, the table set, almost like magic before her eyes. Esther, in the years that her father had been troubled

and ill, had been house-mother, and a very deft and nice one she was.

At first Miss Harper demurred; she could not bear to have any one touch her particular duster, her special broom, her precious china. But she soon saw that though little and young, Esther was careful and old beyond her years. So gradually she came to sit in the rocking-chair and be waited on.

For weeks Esther had gone home at every meal-time, prepared her father's food, cleared it away, and then run back; but before Willy could sit up their father had gone to join the mother in the Happy Land, and they were left a legacy to the world — or to Miss Harper.

The world looked on with interest and doubt, to see what "old Miss Harper" would do with the burden so strangely thrown upon her. But there was no doubt or hesitation in her mind. Long before this she had resolved to adopt Esther, and the patient, sweet temper of Willy had won him the very warmest corner of her lonely heart. Lonely now no more, she thought, with a flush of happiness.

"I have n't a relation in the world, child," she said to Esther, when she began to worry about their future, "and you 've been such a comfort to me that you shall have your home with me as long as I live. Willy, too, — he 's a good boy, — and, in fact, you shall both be mine now, and take what I have to leave when I 'm gone. That 's settled now, and we 'll say no more about it."

No more was said, but much was done. Esther was sent to school and Willy supplied with books and help at home, and in a few years the changes were so great that one would not have known the place.

The house was as neat as ever, but the blinds were opened now in every room. The flower garden was prim and old-fashioned as ever, but there was always a blossom for every passing child. Miss Harper was whiter haired, and older of course, though she looked younger, and had really become quite plump.

She usually sat in her rocking-chair, at the same old window, while bustling around the house was a smiling, happy-faced young girl

with a song always on her lips. Bending over a book was often seen Willy, a hard student, somewhat lame, but growing stronger, and preparing for college, where Miss Harper insisted on sending him.

In time fine houses were built above, on the hill, and the road straightened and graded, but the old log that turned the toboggan from its course on its last ride was never allowed to be moved.

"It shall stand while I live," said Miss Harper firmly. "It brought me the best fortune of my life."

"That was a very nice story indeed!" said Kristy. "What a lovely plan this was, Mamma! I never had such a delightful Christmas!"

"Unfortunately," said Aunt Lu, "my story is about another maiden lady, though she was not so terrible as Miss Harper; in fact, she was very nice."

CHAPTER IX

THE TELLTALE TILE

It begins with a bit of gossip of a neighbor who had come in to see Miss Bennett, and was telling her about a family who had lately moved into the place and were in serious trouble. "And they do say she 'll have to go to the poorhouse," she ended.

"To the poorhouse! how dreadful! And the children too?" and Miss Bennett shuddered.

"Yes; unless somebody 'll adopt them, and that 's not very likely. — Well, I must go," the visitor went on, rising. "I wish I could do something for her, but, with my houseful of children, I 've got use for every penny I can rake and scrape."

"I 'm sure I have, with only myself," said Miss Bennett, as she closed the door. "I 'm sure I have," she repeated to herself as she resumed her knitting; "it 's as much as I can

do to make ends meet, scrimping as I do, not to speak of laying up a cent for sickness and old age."

"But the poorhouse!" she said again. "I wish I could help her!" and the needles flew in and out, in and out, faster than ever, as she turned this over in her mind. "I might give up something," she said at last, "though I don't know what, unless — unless," she said slowly, thinking of her one luxury, "unless I give up my tea, and it don't seem as if I *could* do that."

Some time the thought worked in her mind, and finally she resolved to make the sacrifice of her only indulgence for six months, and send the money to her suffering neighbor, Mrs. Stanley, though she had never seen her, and had only heard she was in want.

How much of a sacrifice that was you can hardly guess, you, Kristy, who have so many luxuries.

That evening Mrs. Stanley was surprised by a small gift of money "from a friend," as was said on the envelope containing it.

"Who sent it?" she asked, from the bed where she was lying.

"Miss Bennett told me not to tell," said the boy, unconscious that he had already told.

The next day Miss Bennett sat at the window knitting, as usual,—for her constant contribution to the poor fund of the church was a certain number of stockings and mittens,—when she saw a young girl coming up to the door of the cottage.

"Who can that be?" she said to herself. "I never saw her before. Come in!" she called, in answer to a knock. The girl entered, and walked up to Miss Bennett.

"Are you Miss Bennett?" she asked.

"Yes," said Miss Bennett, with an amused smile.

"Well, I 'm Hetty Stanley."

Miss Bennett started, and her color grew a little brighter.

"I 'm glad to see you, Hetty," she said; "won't you sit down?"

"Yes, if you please," said Hetty, taking a chair near her.

"I came to tell you," she began simply, "how much we love you for —"

"Oh, don't! don't say any more!" interrupted Miss Bennett; "never mind that! Tell me about your mother and your baby brother."

This was an interesting subject, and Hetty talked earnestly about it. The time passed so quickly that, before she knew it, she had been in the house an hour. When she went away Miss Bennett asked her to come again, a thing she had never been known to do before, for she was not fond of young people in general.

"But then, Hetty 's different," she said to herself, when wondering at her own interest.

"Did you thank kind Miss Bennett?" was her mother's question as Hetty opened the door.

Hetty stopped as if struck. "Why, no! I don't believe I did."

"And stayed so long, too? Whatever did you do? I've heard she is n't fond of people generally."

"We talked; and I think she 's ever so nice. She asked me to come again; may I?"

"Of course you may, if she cares to have you. I should be glad to do something to please her."

That visit of Hetty's was the first of a long series. Almost every day she found her way to the lonely cottage, where a visitor rarely came, and a strange intimacy grew up between the old and the young. Hetty learned of her friend to knit, and many an hour they spent knitting while Miss Bennett ransacked her memory for stories to tell. And then, one day, she brought down from a big chest in the garret two of the books she used to have when she was young, and let Hetty look at them.

One was "Thaddeus of Warsaw," and the other "Scottish Chiefs." Poor Hetty had not the dozens of books you have, and these were treasures indeed. She read them to herself, and she read them aloud to Miss Bennett, who, much to her own surprise, found her interest almost as eager as Hetty's.

All this time Christmas was drawing near, and strange, unusual feelings began to stir in Miss Bennett's heart, though generally she did not think much about that happy time. She wanted to make Hetty a happy day. Money she had none, so she went into the garret, where her youthful treasures had long been hidden. From the chest from which she had taken the books she now took a small box of light-colored wood, with a transferred engraving on the cover. With a sigh, — for the sight of it brought up old memories, — Miss Bennett lifted the cover by its loop of ribbon, took out a package of old letters, and went down-stairs with the box, taking also a few bits of bright silk from a bundle in the chest.

"I can fit it up for a work-box," she said, "and I'm sure Hetty will like it."

For many days after this Miss Bennett had her secret work, which she carefully hid when she saw Hetty coming. Slowly, in this way, she made a pretty needle-book, a tiny pincushion, and an emery bag like a big strawberry. Then from her own scanty stock she

added needles, pins, thread, and her only pair of small scissors, scoured to the last extreme of brightness. One thing only she had to buy — a thimble, and that she bought for a penny, of brass so bright it was quite as handsome as gold.

Very pretty the little box looked when full; in the bottom lay a quilted lining, which had always been there, and upon this the fittings she had made. Besides this, Miss Bennett knit a pair of mittens for each of Hetty's brothers and sisters.

The happiest girl in town on Christmas morning was Hetty Stanley. To begin with, she had the delight of giving the mittens to the children, and when she ran over to tell Miss Bennett how pleased they were, she was surprised by the present of the odd little work-box and its pretty contents.

Christmas was over all too soon, and New Year's, and it was about the middle of January that the time came which, all her life, Miss Bennett had dreaded — the time when she should be helpless. She had not money

enough to hire a girl, and so the only thing she could imagine when that day should come was her special horror — the poorhouse.

But that good deed of hers had already borne fruit, and was still bearing. When Hetty came over one day, and found her dear friend lying on the floor as if dead, she was dreadfully frightened, of course, but she ran after the neighbors and the doctor, and bustled about the house as if she belonged to it.

Miss Bennett was not dead — she had a slight stroke of paralysis; and though she was soon better, and would be able to talk, and probably to knit, and possibly to get about the house, she would never be able to live alone and do everything for herself, as she had done.

So the doctor told the neighbors who came in to help, and so Hetty heard, as she listened eagerly for news.

"Of course she can't live here any longer; she'll have to go to a hospital," said one woman.

"Or to the poorhouse, more likely," said another.

"She 'll hate that," said the first speaker. "I 've heard her shudder over the poorhouse."

"She shall never go there!" declared Hetty, with blazing eyes.

"Hoity-toity! who 's to prevent?" asked the second speaker, turning a look of disdain on Hetty.

"I am," was the fearless answer. "I know all Miss Bennett's ways, and I can take care of her, and I will," went on Hetty indignantly; and turning suddenly, she was surprised to see Miss Bennett's eyes fixed on her with an eager, questioning look.

"There! she understands! she 's better!" cried Hetty. "May n't I stay and take care of you, dear Miss Bennett?" she asked, running up to the bed.

"Yes, you may," interrupted the doctor, seeing the look in his patient's face; "but you must n't agitate her now. And now, my good women," — turning to the others, — "I think she can get along with her young friend here,

whom I happen to know is a womanly young girl, and will be attentive and careful."

They took the hint and went away, and the doctor gave directions to Hetty what to do, telling her she must not leave Miss Bennett. So she was now regularly installed as nurse and housekeeper.

Days and weeks rolled by. Miss Bennett was able to be up in her chair, to talk and knit, and to walk about the house, but was not able to be left alone. Indeed, she had a horror of being left alone; she could not bear Hetty out of her sight, and Hetty's mother was very willing to spare her, for she had many mouths to fill.

To provide food for two out of what had been scrimping for one was a problem; but Miss Bennett ate very little, and she did not resume her tea, so they managed to get along and not really suffer.

One day Hetty sat by the fire with her precious box on her knee, which she was putting to rights for the twentieth time. The box was empty, and her sharp young eyes noticed a little dust on the silk lining.

"I think I 'll take this out and dust it," she said to Miss Bennett, "if you don't mind."

"Do as you like with it," answered Miss Bennett; "it is yours."

So she carefully lifted the silk, which stuck a little.

"Why, here 's something under it," she said, — "an old paper, and it has writing on."

"Bring it to me," said Miss Bennett; "perhaps it 's a letter I have forgotten."

Hetty brought it.

"Why, it 's father's writing!" said Miss Bennett, looking closely at the faded paper; "and what can it mean? I never saw it before. It says, 'Look, and ye shall find' — that 's a Bible text. And what is this under it? 'A word to the wise is sufficient.' I don't understand — he must have put it there himself, for I never took that lining out — I thought it was fastened. What can it mean?" and she pondered over it long, and all day seemed absent-minded.

After tea, when they sat before the kitchen fire, as they always did, with only the firelight

flickering and dancing on the walls while they knitted, or told stories, or talked, she told Hetty about her father; that they had lived comfortably in this house, which he built, and that everybody supposed that he had plenty of money, and would leave enough to take care of his only child, but that when he died suddenly nothing had been found, and nothing ever had been, from that day to this.

"Part of the place I let to John Thompson, Hetty, and that rent is all I have to live on. I don't know what makes me think of old times so to-night."

"I know," said Hetty; "it 's that paper, and I know what it reminds me of," she suddenly shouted, in a way very unusual with her. "It 's that tile over there," and she jumped up and ran to the side of the fireplace, and put her hand on the tile she meant.

On each side of the fireplace was a row of tiles. They were Bible subjects, and Miss Bennett had often told Hetty the story of each one, and also the stories she used to make up about them, when she was young. The one

Hetty had her hand on now bore the picture of a woman standing before a closed door, and below her the words of the yellow bit of paper: "Look, and ye shall find."

"I always felt there was something different about that," said Hetty eagerly, "and you know you told me your father talked to you about it — about what to seek in the world when he was gone away, and other things."

"Yes, so he did," said Miss Bennett thoughtfully; "come to think of it, he said a great deal about it, and in a meaning way. I don't understand it," she said slowly, turning it over in her mind.

"I do!" cried Hetty enthusiastically. "I believe you are to seek here! I believe it 's loose!" and she tried to shake it. "It *is* loose!" she cried excitedly. "Oh, Miss Bennett, may I take it out?"

Miss Bennett had turned deadly pale. "Yes," she gasped, hardly knowing what she expected, or dared to hope.

A sudden push from Hetty's strong fingers, and the tile slipped out at one side and fell to

the floor. Behind it was an opening into the brickwork. Hetty thrust in her hand.

"There 's something in there!" she said in an awed tone.

"A light!" said Miss Bennett hoarsely.

There was not a candle in the house, but Hetty seized a brand from the fire, and held it up and looked in.

"It looks like bags — tied up," she cried. "Oh, come here yourself!"

The old woman hobbled over and thrust her hand into the hole, bringing out what was once a bag, but which crumbled to pieces in her hands, and with it — oh, wonder! — a handful of gold pieces, which fell with a jingle on the hearth, and rolled every way.

"My father's money! Oh, Hetty!" was all she could say, and she seized a chair to keep from falling, while Hetty was nearly wild, and talked like a crazy person.

"Oh, goody! goody! now you can have things to eat! and we can have a candle! and you won't have to go to the poorhouse!"

"No, indeed, you dear child!" cried Miss

Bennett, who had found her voice. "Thanks to you — you blessing! — I shall be comfortable now the rest of my days. And you! oh! I shall never forget you! Through you has everything good come to me."

"Oh, but you have been so good to me, dear Miss Bennett!"

"I should never have guessed it, you precious child! If it had not been for your quickness I should have died and never found it."

"And if you had n't given me the box, it might have rusted away in that chest."

"Thank God for everything, child! Take money out of my purse and go buy a candle. We need not save it for bread now. Oh, child!" she interrupted herself, "do you know, we shall have everything we want tomorrow! Go! go! I want to see how much there is."

The candle bought, the gold was taken out and counted, and proved to be more than enough to give Miss Bennett a comfortable income without touching the principal. It was put back, and the tile replaced, as the safest

place to keep it till morning, when Miss Bennett intended to put it into a bank.

But though they went to bed, there was not a wink of sleep for Miss Bennett, for planning what she would do. There were a thousand things she wanted to do first. To get clothes for Hetty, to brighten up the old house, to hire a girl to relieve Hetty, so that the dear child should go to school, to train her into a noble woman — all her old ambitions and wishes for herself sprang into life for Hetty. For not a thought of her future life was separate from Hetty.

In a very short time everything was changed in Miss Bennett's cottage. She had publicly adopted Hetty, and announced her as her heir. A girl had been installed in the kitchen, and Hetty, in pretty new clothes, had begun school. Fresh paint inside and out, with many new comforts, made the old house charming and bright. But nothing could change the pleasant and happy relations between the two friends, and a more contented and cheerful household could not be found anywhere.

Happiness is a wonderful doctor, and Miss Bennett grew so much better that she could travel, and when Hetty had finished school days, they saw a little of the world before they settled down to a quiet, useful life.

"Every comfort on earth I owe to you," said Hetty, one day, when Miss Bennett had proposed some new thing to add to her enjoyment.

"Ah, dear Hetty! how much more do I owe to you! But for you I should, no doubt, be at this moment a shivering pauper in that terrible poorhouse, while some one else would be living in this dear old house. And it all comes," she added softly, "of that one unselfish thought, of that one self-denial for others."

"Now, Mrs. Anthony, please," said Kristy.

"I 'm not much of a story-teller," said Mrs. Anthony, "but I am willing to do my share, and I do know of a curious Christmas tree out on a lawn. It was at the house of a friend, and it happened this way."

CHAPTER X

THE BIRDS' CHRISTMAS TREE

THE younger daughter of the house was very ill, and so the usual Christmas tree was put off, but Santa Claus slipped in quietly and brought presents to the other children, among the rest to Grace, the elder daughter, what she liked best of everything, three or four new books.

After breakfast she started off, meaning to have a long delightful day, curled up in a big blue chair in the library, reading. This pleasant picture Mamma spoiled, as Grace started off with her books after breakfast.

"My dear," she said, "I shall have to depend on you to keep the twins quiet to-day."

"Where's Mary?" said Grace, pausing with her hand on the door-knob, all the sunshine going out of her face.

"Mary had to go home to-day," said

Mamma, "and you know, dear, it is the critical day with Bessie. I shall not leave her, and the house must be kept very still."

"Well; I suppose they can stay with me," said Grace, rather ungraciously, adding: "Boys, bring your playthings into the library."

"But, my dear," said Mamma, hesitating, "I hate to spoil your pleasure to-day; but you know if you open a book, you will forget your charge."

"Not look at my new books!" exclaimed Grace. "Oh, I could n't possibly help it! I won't forget."

"Grace," said her mother gravely, "I know you too well, and it is my particular request that you do not even open one of your books to-day. I know it 's hard," she went on, seeing the look in Grace's face, "but the life of your sister may be the forfeit."

"Hard!" cried Grace hotly, "I think it 's horrid!" and she rushed out of the room before her mother could say another word. She hurried into the library, flung herself into the blue chair, and burst into angry tears.

"I think it 's just horrid!" she sobbed violently. "It 's bad enough to take care of those two young ones without giving up my books!"

"But you know, Grace Houghton," said something within, "you *know* you 'd forget them."

"What if I did for a tiny minute," she burst out in reply to her own thoughts; "they could n't turn the house over in a minute."

"No; but they could throw down a table, as they did yesterday," suggested the monitor within; "and a sudden shock, the doctor says, might kill Bessie."

"There 's one good thing," said Grace suddenly, sitting up and looking fondly at the books she still held in her arms, "she did n't say I should not; she only 'requested' me not to."

"But you would n't disobey a request of Mamma's," was the next thought, on which Grace turned red and looked very sulky indeed.

Just then the door opened, and the two

boys and a load of playthings were brought in and deposited, with the message: —

"Your mother said I was to bring these to you, Miss Grace."

Well; that was not a very promising opening for Christmas morning, to be sure, and it stayed dismal for some time. Grace sat in the blue chair, very cross and sulky, and the twins, five years old and very lively, played with their toys on the floor. Every few minutes Grace had to interfere with a sharp "Boys, do be still!" "Harry, stop dragging that train across the floor!" "Willie, don't climb on that table!" and so on; but in spite of these efforts, a good deal of noise was made in the room.

The fall of a chair at last fully aroused her; she sprang up.

"Grace Houghton," she said warmly, "I'm ashamed of you! Do you want never to see your sister again? Do you care more for a story-book than you do for Bessie?" Resolutely she crossed the room, opened a drawer in a book-case, laid her precious books in,

shut it and locked it, put the key in her pocket, and turned to the twins, who had just arranged a street-car with chairs, and were ready for a lively time.

"Dear! dear! what shall I do with them?" she thought, glancing out of the window as she passed it. "I must get up something quiet to amuse them," and vacantly her eyes wandered over the scene outside, the whole world covered with snow, and glittering in the warm sunshine. Something she saw gave her the idea.

"I know!" she suddenly exclaimed, "that 'll do, I 'm sure! Boys, let 's have a Christmas party."

"When? where? Who 'll we invite?" came quickly from the pair, who left their own play at once.

"We 'll have it as soon as we can get ready," said Grace, lively enough now, "and we 'll invite — let me see," she hesitated, — "all the Grays, and the Browns, the Big Blue, and the two Topknots, and — "

"Oh, I know!" shouted Harry, "the birds!"

"Yes, the birds!" said Grace. "You see, the snow has covered up everything they have to eat, and I'm sure they'll come here on the lawn where we always feed them. There's one now — see him?"

"I do!" cried Willie, "a robin! he's waiting for crumbs."

"Well, now, Bobby," speaking to the bird perched on a low tree, and evidently looking at them in the window, "we'll invite you to dinner, and all the rest of the birds out there," — waving her hand toward the woods, which came quite near the house, — "in about an hour. Please tell everybody to come."

"Tut! tut!" said the robin, with a flirt of his tail.

"Hear him answer you!" cried Harry, laughing.

"Peep! tut! tut! tut!" went on the robin.

"Yes; you'll have to wait till the table's set," said Grace in reply. "We'll — boys!" with a sudden thought, "we'll make them a Christmas tree! You know John got one for

us, that we could n't use because of Bessie. I 'll get him to cut it off, and we 'll fix it up for the birds."

"Oh, what a funny tree!" cried the boys; "what 'll we put on?"

"You 'll see," said Grace. "I don't know myself yet, but something they 'll like! Now will you sit still as two mice while I go and see if we can have the tree?"

They both promised, but she took care to give them a new picture-book to look at while she was gone. Before they had exhausted their book she came back, and John behind her with the tree, or rather the top of it. He had sawed it off about four feet high, and fitted it into the standard made for it, so that it stood up nicely.

"Now, what shall we put on?" began Willie, tossing the book aside.

"Well, what do we give the birds?" asked Grace.

"Seeds," said Willie, "and crumbs — and — and — and — "

"And bones," burst in Harry.

"Yes, and meat," said Grace.

"Meat?" cried Harry.

"Why, yes! does n't Bobby there eat worms all summer on the lawn, and are n't worms meat, I 'd like to know?" said Grace; "and you know there 's lots of little fellows eat meat. You remember little Quanky, who 's always going round and round, knocking at the doors and jerking out the tiny grubs in the trees?"

"Yes," said Harry, with wide-open eyes, "and 'Boy Blue'! Don't you 'member what a long worm he had one day? longer 'n he was."

"An' 'Foxie,' 't used to jump so after grasshoppers," chimed in Willie.

These children knew so much about birds, you must know, because their mother was very fond of them, and told the boys their names, what they ate, and many things about them.

For half an hour there were three very busy pairs of feet in that house, as Grace and the boys collected their Christmas gifts; but at

the end of that time everything was piled on the library table, and the work of decoration began. Little boxes made of paper were tightly tied on the branches in many places, to hold the seeds; stems of wheat and oats dried for winter bouquets were bound with thread on the ends of the twigs. Grace even added some heavy, drooping stems of rice in the shell, which Uncle Ben had brought her as a curiosity from Georgia, because she knew a certain fellow in a gay coat who especially delighted in that. Fresh raw beef that the cook good-naturedly cut from a steak was snipped with scissors into tiny strips a half-inch or more long, and not much bigger than a pin. Some of these imitation worms were wedged in among the leaves of the tree, and others tied loosely in a bundle and hung on a branch. Two bones out of the same steak were firmly fastened to the small trunk of the tree. Bunches of bitter-sweet with bright red berries were arranged among the branches. All this, though done by eager fingers, took a long time, and then Grace brought out a

cupful of dried currants that had been soaking in hot water all this time. Now they were all plumped out and soft, and she set the happy and busy boys to sticking them onto the sharp, needle-like leaves of the tree.

This was a slow operation, and very droll that tree looked, I can tell you, all blossomed out with dried currants. The last thing was to fill the little boxes with hemp seed, cracked wheat, coarse oatmeal, canary and millet seed, and then, to their great surprise, it was time for luncheon.

When that was over John was called in, and the whole thing carefully carried out and placed on the lawn before the window, just where the birds were used to being fed. Then a dishful of water was set under the tree.

"Will they take a bath?" asked eager Harry.

"No, it 's too cold," said Grace, "but they 'll want a drink, you know; and now we 'll sit in the window and see who comes to our party."

She placed a chair for each.

Hardly were they seated before the fun began.

"There comes Bobby!" from Willie, announced the first arrival. Sure enough, a robin, perhaps the one who had been invited, alighted on a shrub beside this strange new Christmas tree. He looked at it; he flirted his tail; he jerked his body and slapped his wings down on his sides, and at last came down on the snow to see what he could make of it. He ran all around it, in little short runs, stopping and lifting his head every minute to see if anything had happened while he was not looking. He came closer, then something caught his eye — a bone! yes; he knew a beefsteak bone; he 'd seen them before; he boldly pounced on the lowest branch, and attacked that bone as if he had not eaten meat in a month. He shook the tree so that some of the seeds were spilled, but that did n't matter, the birds would like them just as well from the snow.

The boys were so taken up with Bobby's performances that they had not noticed an-

other arrival, till Grace called "chick-a-dees!" and there they were, a little flock, all in black caps and white vests, as trim as dandies. They flew back and forth two or three times, then alighted on the snow around the tree, and devoted themselves to picking up what Master Bobby had scattered. Very busy and sociable they were too, chattering and eating as fast as they could and calling their thanks in lively "chick-a-dee-dee's," when they were ready to go.

"Oh, who 's that?" cried the boys, as a stranger appeared on the lawn. He was dressed in a neat suit of bluish brown, and he gravely walked over the snow to see what the excitement was. He came on in a droll, little mincing way, bobbed his head at every step, and when he reached the tree he turned his funny little head up and looked at Bobby still working away at that bone, chuckling to himself as though this was the very oddest thing he had seen yet.

"That 's a turtle-dove," said Grace, when she got a good sight of him; "is n't he pretty?"

"What 'll he eat?" asked Bobby.

"I don't know; we 'll see," said Grace. And they did; for he began to pick up the seeds from the snow in a doubtful way, as though he suspected they might be poisoned. But he did not stay long, for now came a very noisy party in rusty black, with faded red shoulder-straps. There were only three or four, but they made noise enough for a dozen. The dove walked off with great dignity, and Bobby took flight in a hurry.

One of the newcomers said "Chack! chack!" another uttered a loud scream, and a third said "Whew!" and they all bustled around as if they had n't a minute to stay, and had a great deal to talk about. After some little study of the tree, they pounced on it in a body, and the way the eatables disappeared in those long, black bills was alarming.

"They won't leave a thing," said Willie.

"See how they shake the things out!" said Harry.

"And look at them stuffing themselves!" added Willie. "Let 's scare 'em away!"

"Why, what for?" said Grace. "Didn't we invite them all? These redwings don't seem to have very fine table manners; but they're having a good time anyway, and we can fill up the boxes again."

The redwings ate their fill, sung a song or two, dipped freely into the water, and then left.

For a few minutes the tree was deserted, and then came a lisping group. They alighted on the Christmas tree without fear, they fell at once to eating of the feast found there, and had a good deal to say about it, but never a word above a soft, hissing whisper, — it was droll enough. They were very handsome in olive-colored dress with black spectacles, tall pointed caps, and brilliant red tags on their wing feathers.

"Cherry birds!" the boys cried.

"Cedar birds," said Grace.

While they were enjoying their silent luncheon, another guest came in, even more silent, for the three hosts in the window did not see him till he flashed around the trunk

of the little tree, and gave a long, rattling knock as though he expected a door to open and a grub to walk out.

"Oh, there 's Downy!" was announced, and just that minute he caught sight of one of the bits of meat cut to look like tiny worms. He helped himself, and liked it so well that he took another, and another, and then rapped his thanks and disappeared the way he had come.

Next came down a flock of sparrows, chirping and chattering like a party of school children off on a frolic, — tree sparrows with reddish caps, song sparrows with big black breast knots, fox sparrows that the boys called Foxie, white-throats with black half-mask and white bow at the throat, and all dressed in brown with streaks everywhere. They whirled around the tree as if to see it on all sides, and then settled on the ground and picked up the seeds. Then one spied the meat, and hopped up on the lowest branch, and another one did so because he did, and in about a minute the tree could hardly be seen for the sparrows all over it.

Oh! but they had a good time, and they said so, too, in their way, chirping and talking and giving little snatches of song by way of thanks; and just as the boys began to think there would n't be a thing left, they all suddenly rose in a crowd, whirled once more around the tree, and were off out of sight in a minute.

The next guest alighted on the tree with a flutter, jerked his tail, which he held cocked up in the air, gave a loud call or two, then scolded all whom it might concern, and fell to eating.

"I know that 's a wren; see his tail tipped up. Is n't he funny?"

"Yes," said Grace, "and there 's some one who does n't care for his scolding — see?" and she pointed to the lower part of the tree.

"Quanky! Quanky!" called the boys, and "Quank! quank!" said the little fellow, as he circled around the tree trunk and branches, till he found that food grew on the outside of this bark instead of inside, where he was used to finding it. He was all in dull blue, and Grace called him a nuthatch.

All the afternoon the party of three sat inside the library window and watched the visitors to the Christmas tree. Once or twice the boxes were replenished, and everybody that came seemed to get his fill. There were flocks of snowbirds in black and white, with tails opening and shutting like fans; a bluebird and his little mate picked away at the bones; purple finches all in red and brown, and summer yellowbirds in russet winter suits; a pair of cardinals, fashionably late, ate their fill of the rice, sitting in one place and dropping the shells all over the snow. Last of all, after everybody else had taken his Christmas present and gone, and the boys were beginning to be tired and wonder if supper was n't ready, there arrived the oddest of all their guests. He was a big fellow all in blue and white and black, and he came around in the most wary fashion.

"See the blue jay!" said Grace, and the boys were at once interested. He was a long time making up his mind that the tree was not a new sort of trap. He went around it in long

hops, turning his wise-looking head this way and that, and giving droll little hops up, if anything moved. But when he was satisfied it was all right he hopped to the lower branches and proceeded to have a good time in his own way. Some things he ate, but more he threw down; he seemed to regard it as his business to clear the table. Seed boxes were hammered off, currants — what few were left that he did n't eat — he filled his mouth with, flew down and hid them under one corner of the standard; the empty wheat-stalks he pulled off, likewise the bunches of bitter-sweet, from which the berries were eaten.

"Oh, he 'll pull everything off!" cried the boys.

"Well, what if he does?" said Grace; "the birds can eat from the snow, and he 's so busy and funny I like to see him."

So they watched him a long time, for he had a pretty big job. You see he not only wanted to clear the tree completely, but his ardent wish was to carry off and hide every grain of rice, and every loose seed. He had to give it

up though, for night came on quickly, as it does on Christmas day, you know. While they watched him Mamma came in and told them that the crisis was over and Bessie would get well.

"And what lovely boys you have been!" she added, as she took one in each arm and went out to supper. "And as for you, Grace," she said warmly, "it has been the most useful day of your life — if it was a hard one."

"It was n't hard," said Grace honestly, "only at first. It 's been a lovely day, Mamma."

"An' we 've had a Christmas party, an' lots of folks came to it," broke in the boys together.

"To-morrow you shall tell me all about it," said Mamma.

"It seems to me," said Mr. Roberts, "that all these stories, good as they are, are about girls. Now I shall tell one about boys. I won't say it will be as fine, in fact the boy was very naughty, but it 'll be a variety,

and anyway it's the only one I can think of —"

"Oh!" interrupted Kristy, "any one who can tell such lovely stories as you, may tell just what he likes."

CHAPTER XI

HOW THE HORSE TOLD

It was the first day of skating in the village of B——, and nearly the whole town was out to enjoy it. Every boy and girl fortunate enough to own a pair of skates, and many who were forced to content themselves with sliding, were there. The lake was gay with bright colors, and the air filled with shouts of laughter.

Towards evening there arose between the young people a trial of speed, and a race was quickly arranged. Many started together, but soon all fell off, one after another, till only three were left, the acknowledged best skaters in the village: Kittie Manton, a bright girl, and a great favorite among the schoolboys, and two boys who were equally anxious to keep up with her, and to beat each other. They were about evenly matched, but Phil

Bartlett happened to wear a pair of bright new skates, and in spite of his opponent's strongest efforts, he went ahead, and kept there.

The sport was put an end to by a snowstorm, and the lake was quickly deserted. The skating contest was all in fun, of course, and no one thought of having any feeling about it, except the boy who was beaten. Harry Carter was rather an important personage, in his own estimation, and he went away in a furious rage.

"The mean sneak!" he muttered to himself, as he stalked off towards home, his skates dangling over his shoulder, "just because he had on new skates! He can't beat me in a fair trial, and he knows it! I wonder where he got those Clubs, anyway — his father's as poor as Job's turkey. I'll pay him off, anyway. I'd like to put a few nicks in those new skates, and then see him try to beat me again!" So he went on — this foolish youth — his mind filled with thoughts of revenge.

Evil designs ripen quickly, and before bed-

time Harry had thought of a plan which he meant to carry out that very night.

Phil Bartlett was the son of a farmer, and lived about two miles from the village. After he thought every one was in bed in the quiet town, Harry Carter stole out of his window onto the top of a piazza, climbed down the trellis, to the injury of some vines which grew over it, and took his way to the stable. He dared not touch one of the carriage horses, for his father was very particular about them, and very observing, but neither did he intend walking two miles into the country, even to be revenged. His father had a superannuated horse called Ned, kept solely for the purpose of dragging barrels of water from the spring at the back of the lot which supplied the house.

No one would notice whether Ned was used or not — so reasoned Harry — and Ned should carry him out to the Bartlett farm. The old horse was soon saddled and brought out, though not without some difficulty; for the intelligent animal knew as well as Harry did

that night was his time to rest. However, out he was finally driven, and Harry mounted and rode out of the yard.

On ordinary occasions he would not have enjoyed a midnight ride through the lonely woods, but now he was too angry to care for anything, however unpleasant. When he reached Bartlett's, he found the gate open into the yard, and he rode directly in, turning one side away from the house, and off from the road, and tied Ned to a tree near.

Harry's long ride had somewhat cooled his rage, and as he opened the side-door of the farmhouse, which was never locked, the thought struck him that his proceeding was very much like that of a burglar. The notion of Squire Carter's son being a burglar tickled his fancy so much that he had to smother a laugh.

"Now where shall I look for the confounded skates?" he thought, as he fumbled around the walls of the passageway. "I wonder where Phil sleeps? Would n't it be a joke to take them right out from under his very nose! No doubt he sleeps with them beside him,

they 're so precious!" he added sneeringly, his anger of the afternoon rising in his heart again.

Just at the moment his groping hand fell on the skates, hanging from a peg among coats and hats.

"Jolly! that's lucky!" he thought, running his hand over them, to be sure that they were the new ones. "He must have known I was coming, and hung 'em here handy! I'll soon fix *you!*" he went on, "and I've a good mind to carry off the beggar's coat and hat too, just to keep him at home awhile; the skating won't last long, and it'll be good for his precious health." With this, not stopping to give it a second thought, he snatched a coat and a fur cap which he well knew was Phil's, stole softly out, and closed the door. The garments he thought he would hide for a day or two, and then write a note, anonymously, to tell where they might be found; but the skates he must injure seriously. A few sharp blows across a stone that he had noticed where he tied his horse, made them

for the time, at least, if not forever, quite useless. He then gave them a fling towards the house, not wishing to take the trouble to restore them to their peg.

The coat and hat he carried off a half mile on his way home, to a deserted barn he knew of, and threw them into a window. He knew no one would be likely to go to the building, and when he had had enough sport out of it, he could easily let Phil know where they were to be found.

Having thus completed his mischief, he hurried home, urging old Ned into a pace that he seldom indulged in, in his old age. He put the tired horse into the stable, and at last, towards morning, climbed the trellis again, and crept into bed.

As the school bell rang the next morning, and Harry went in with the other scholars, he chuckled at the idea that Master Phil would stay at home to-day, and he smiled as he pictured his rage. What then was his amazement to see Phil in his usual seat, hard at work with his books. He did not look up, and

Harry began to fear that he had not yet discovered the accident to his skates, and that he himself must have dreamed about the coat and cap. When out at recess, he saw that Phil wore a different cap, but no other sign could he discover that his revenge had been taken.

But although Phil looked calm, there was a tempest under his quiet face. He was only waiting for the proper time, to speak out. On getting up that morning early, as he always did, he had been unable to resist one glance at the beloved skates. A new pair of skates to Harry Carter meant simply going to a store and buying them, but to Phil Bartlett they meant months of saving money, and hours of extra work. This pair was the result of a whole summer's self-denial and saving, and he valued them accordingly. He did not find them in their usual place, and a quick search revealed the fact that his cap was also gone. To get more light, he opened the door. The light snow on the ground, which had ceased before Harry came out, showed footprints and suggested to Phil that a thief had been around.

Careful not to step on the tracks, he went out, and near the door came upon the ruined skates. A cry of horror escaped him as he gathered them up, and now with greatest care —for it was his only clue to the perpetrator— he followed the trail. The footprints led directly to a tree, where he found the tracks of a horse, and the dents in the stone where the skates had been injured.

Following the horse's tracks, which were perfectly clear and distinct, he came to the road, and there they turned towards the village, and were lost. A groan fell from his lips at this point. "I shall never find him!" he thought. Yet in looking closer he noticed something unusual in the footprints of the horse. He stooped to examine, and made the curious discovery that no two of the horse's feet were in the same condition. Of the fore feet one shoe was loose and the other was smooth, as he could easily see from the track; and of the hind feet one had a shoe that was broken and the other had no shoe at all.

Getting these facts carefully in his mind,

Phil went back to the house and called his father, who also examined the trail, and then, finding his coat gone from its usual peg, put on another, and started for the village to see lawyer James, telling Phil to go to school as usual, while he worked the thing up.

Near the village he found a cast horseshoe, with which he at once went to the village blacksmith, who made all the horseshoes for the neighborhood. A little questioning brought out the fact that the stray shoe belonged to Squire Carter's Ned, and an examination of the horse's feet confirmed his statement, and also proved that Ned was the horse who had left his tracks in Mr. Bartlett's yard. The broken vines, and the disordered state of the snow on the roof, were scarcely needed to point out the culprit.

The working out of all this, and consulting with the lawyer, took time, and school was about being dismissed before it was brought to a conclusion. Perhaps no one was ever more confounded than Harry Carter, when, on leaving the schoolroom that morning, he found

himself face to face with the village constable, who arrested him on the charge of theft, in sight of the whole school.

"It's false!" shouted Harry, white with rage. "Who says so? Prove it!"

"It is easily proved," said the officer. "You were tracked to the door of the house from your own window."

"I admit," said Harry haughtily, noticing Phil's eager face in the crowd which gathered around them, "that I went out to be revenged, and to spoil a pair of skates, but I'm not a burglar — I did n't break into a house."

"Not strictly," said the man, "for the house was not locked, but you are arrested for stealing."

"I never did!" shouted Harry again, furious at this charge.

"There's a coat and hat gone," said the officer quietly.

Harry had forgotten them; a scornful smile crept over his face.

"That was a joke; they're in Johnson's barn; I was going to write a note, telling

where they could be found, to-morrow or next day."

"The law recognizes no jokes," said the constable. "You entered the house at night, and carried away property, whatever your motive. You 'll have to prove it a joke — if you can — before the Justice, and anyway I can't stay here talking. You 'll have to go, and you had better go quietly, or — " and he made a significant gesture, which convinced Harry that he meant what he said. It did begin to look like stealing now, and Harry's face fell.

He was followed by all the boys in school, as he marched to the room where the Justice was found, and in shame and mortification heard the whole story of his night's exploit related by Phil. It was corroborated by Mr. Bartlett, and also by his father's stableman, who had to acknowledge finding the old horse tired out, for he was not used of late even to four-mile journeys, and to recognize the missing shoe.

The best witness, however, was Ned himself; for on being taken out to the farm by

Squire Carter, who refused to believe in his son's guilt till he had inspected the evidences for himself, the intelligent animal, when the lines were left loose, turned of his own accord into the gate, and leaving the beaten path, turned one side and came to a halt under the tree. The evidence was irresistible, and the horse was the one who told, with his unusual tracks and this conclusive conduct.

Squire Carter, mortified and angry at the foolish performance of his son, resolved to give him a good lesson, that should cure him of any desire to take the law into his own hands again. He first let him spend one night, which was Christmas eve, in the jail to give him time to think about it; and then he settled the matter by the payment of quite a large sum of money.

Even that was not the end, for to make sure that the lesson was well learned, and his somewhat hot-headed son thoroughly cured of malicious mischief, he insisted upon Harry's paying the amount of the costs from his own money.

Now this was worse than all. For a year Harry had been saving his money — as well as Phil — but not for a paltry pair of skates. His aim and the desire of his heart was to own a yacht, in which to navigate the waters of a beautiful lake near the village. He was expert in the management of boats, and delighted in them more than in any other thing, and he had collected nearly the amount necessary to make the purchase.

More than this: he had selected his boat, and induced the owner to wait a week more, till his next allowance should complete the sum asked for it; he had talked about it with all the boys, fixed upon a new name for it, and even asked Kittie Manton to confer it as soon as the spring should open and the season begin. He almost felt that the yacht was his own.

And now — it was almost like drawing his heart from his body; but his father sternly insisted that he should give every cent of that precious money to farmer Bartlett, to settle the affair without a trial and imprisonment.

It was many years before Harry Carter could thank his upright father for this act which seemed so cruel at the time, but he did at last; and he admitted — after he had grown to respected manhood — that it had put an end to his boyish desire to be revenged.

"We 'll have to go back to the girls if I tell the only queer story I know of Christmas," said Miss Kate. "This is about one whom we all know, Aunt Jane's pretty niece Bessie. Aunt Jane told it to me herself several years ago. It happened when Bessie first came to her."

CHAPTER XII

THE CAT'S CHARM

One day Aunt Jane and her niece were sitting quietly at work, when there came a long, pitiful mew at the kitchen door.

"There 's that cat again!" cried Aunt Jane excitedly. "Go drive her out, Elizabeth! This minute! Quick!"

A pale, thin child, about ten years old, rose slowly from a low seat by the window, where she was sewing, and started for the door.

"Be lively, now! I believe you 've got lead in your feet! I never saw a child of your age so slow," went on Aunt Jane. The child hastened and disappeared through the back door, while Aunt Jane resumed her knitting.

"I certainly don't know what I shall do with that child," she said to herself, as her needles flew in and out of the coarse gray yarn she was fashioning into a sock for the poor

of next winter. "Such a mope I never saw! — the very sight of her gives me the blues. If she was nice and bright now, she'd be almost a comfort to me; but she grows stupid and dumb every day, till now she scarcely opens her lips from morning to night. I'm sure I don't know why; I've tried hard enough to do my duty by her; she wants nothing. — But I wonder why she doesn't come back?" she went on, after a pause, at the same time stepping towards the door to look after her charge. As she opened the door the child's voice fell on her ear, and its tone made her pause. It was very different from the dull voice she knew, and then the words amazed her.

"Dear pussy," she heard, in a tender, low tone, "I'm so sorry, but you must go home! Aunt Jane 'hates cats,' and I daren't have you come here. I'm afraid she'll throw something at you!"

The listener stepped a little nearer to look through a window, when she saw the child seated on the step, with an ugly yellow cat in her arms, and actually hugged to her heart.

"Oh, dear kitty!" the little voice went on with a sob, "you remind me so much of my own darling kitty, that I had to leave at home when Papa died, and I want her so! She loved me dearly. I wonder if she's forgotten me!" The little face went down in the yellow fur, and the affectionate cat purred and rubbed against her cheek, trying its best to console her. In a moment the child raised her head.

"I dare n't stay any longer, dearest kitty. I have n't got my 'stint' done, and Aunt Jane 'hates idlers.' Good-by, darling" — and she kissed the cat, carefully lifted her over the low fence, and dropped her lightly onto her own steps, while Aunt Jane hastily slipped back to her seat, and began to knit furiously. When, a moment later, the child came in with the old weary step, she saw nothing unusual about her aunt, and she sat down on her stool again and took up her work.

But there was something unusual in Aunt Jane, though it did not show outside; there was commotion in her mind; she had received a new idea, and it was working. Her lips

were pursed up as usual, and her needles flew faster than ever, but something like this was passing in her thoughts:

"Really, the child is unhappy! I wonder why! I thought I had done everything for her! We two are the last of the family, and ought to be a comfort to each other." Here she moved her chair a little, and glanced at the child. Bessie was bending over her work, but her hands moved slowly, and her eyes were heavy and dull.

"I suppose she 's lonely," was Aunt Jane's next thought, "and perhaps she misses her old friends," she went on more slowly. "How she did talk to that cat! As if she loved it! — Well, I suppose a child needs to love something, if it is only a cat. I wonder if I 've been too hard with her? I 've lived alone so long, maybe I expect too much. Elizabeth!"—this last aloud.

The child started, and looked up quickly.

"What makes you start so when I speak?" said Aunt Jane sharply. "I don't bite."

"I — I — never was called Elizabeth,"

stammered the child, "except when I was naughty."

"What were you called, then? Elizabeth is your name, I believe."

"Yes, but I was always Bessie at home," said she timidly.

"Humph!" said Aunt Jane, "I don't approve of nicknames."

"Papa always called me so," said Bessie, with a little tremble in her voice.

Aunt Jane rubbed her nose. Bessie's father had been her favorite brother, and his doing anything used to be the best of reasons for her doing it. But she went on.

"What did you do at home?"

Bessie looked up questioningly.

"Did you sew? or play all the time? or what did you do?"

"Oh! — I went to school most always," said the child, her face brightening as thoughts of "home" grew on her, "and I sewed some — I made Papa two beautiful handkerchiefs! — and I picked the berries for tea; and — and — I played a good deal in the yard."

"Did you have a nice yard?" asked Aunt Jane.

"Oh, beautiful!" cried Bessie enthusiastically, "so large and shady — and such green grass — and I had a swing under the apple-tree, and — and — " She stopped short.

"And what?" said Aunt Jane.

"And — I wish I was dead, too! — I do — I do!" burst out poor Bessie, with a flood of tears, "and now I know you 'll hate me worse than ever!" and throwing down her work, she ran hastily out of the room, up-stairs to her own bedroom.

Aunt Jane sat as if stunned, for a moment.

"Hate her worse than ever!" she said at last. "What does the child mean? Why should she think I 'hate her'?"

A long time she sat there thinking. The knitting lay idle on her lap; the clock rapidly ticked away the minutes into hours; the fire gradually burned down; all unnoticed by this most systematic housekeeper. Back to her own childhood traveled her busy thoughts:

old memories, old hopes, stirred in her heart, and her reverie was long and deep.

"Well, I believe that 's the 'charm,' and I 'll try it!" she said aloud at last, and coming out of her brown study, she glanced at the clock.

"Six o'clock, as I 'm alive! and not a thing done about tea!" She sprang from her seat, sending the coarse sock and its big gray ball across the room, and upsetting her footstool with a crash. Things were lively for a few minutes in that pleasant room, while she mended the fire, put on the kettle, drew out a small round table, and began to spread it for tea. In less time than one would think possible, the kettle was boiling and the tea put on; the table set, and all things ready. She then went to the door and called "Bessie!"

The child had cried herself quiet long before, and was now sitting on the edge of her bed, alarmed at the growing darkness, and fearing her aunt would never forgive her naughty words. "She must have had tea long ago," she thought, "and I don't believe she 's

going to let me have any; and how can I live here any longer!"

This thought was interrupted by the call of "Bessie." Her heart leaped within her. She rushed to the door.

"What, ma'am?"

"Come to tea, child," said Aunt Jane pleasantly. Bessie could hardly believe her ears, but she crept softly down-stairs. The neat kitchen was light and cheerful, the tea steamed on the table, and beside the usual snowy bread stood a dish of marmalade, her favorite sweetmeat, which she had often looked longingly at, on Aunt Jane's top shelf.

Now pleasant tones are comforting, and so is marmalade, each in its own way, and a smile stole to her lips as she took her seat opposite her aunt.

"Really," thought that lady, looking at the brightening face, "the cat's charm works quickly."

"Bessie, will you have some marmalade?"

"Yes, if you please, Aunt Jane," said Bessie.

When tea was over, Bessie offered to help

wash the dishes, for — as you have seen — Aunt Jane was a country-bred, old-fashioned Yankee housekeeper, who could n't endure a "shiftless servant girl" about her. Bessie had never offered to help before, and now she was very careful as she handled the dainty old china, which was an heirloom, and more precious than gold in Aunt Jane's eyes. "You see, Bessie," said she, as she showed her how to delicately rinse each frail cup and gently dry it on the soft old damask, "this china was your grandmother's, and it 'll be yours when I am dead. None but ladies have ever washed a piece of it, and not a piece is broken or lost. It 's worth its weight in gold nearly, now that old things are so fashionable; but I 'd as soon think of selling my eyes as the dear old china. I hope you 'll learn to love it as I do. I can't bear the thought of having it leave the family."

"Oh! I 'm sure, Aunt," said Bessie, happily, "if it is ever mine, I 'll take the best care of it."

After tea was cleared away, Aunt Jane took

her knitting, and Bessie her school-books, and not a word was spoken till the clock struck nine, and the child closed her books to go to bed.

"Bessie," said her aunt, "did n't you ask me, when you first came here, to let you send for your cat?"

"Yes 'm," said Bessie, surprised.

"Well, I 've thought of it, and concluded to let you have it."

"Why! — I thought you hated cats," burst from the astonished Bessie.

"Well, my dear, I do in general; but I see you are lonely, and I 'm going to try having a companion for you. I think a cat will be less trouble than a child."

"And so much nicer!" broke in Bessie. "Oh! I 'll be so glad, Aunt Jane! — and I most know you 'll like her — she 's so beautiful! — and not a bit of trouble."

Aunt Jane smiled. "Well, I 'll try it for once."

That night a letter was written to an old neighbor, who had promised to send the cat

when Bessie wrote for it, and the next morning a bright-faced girl — quite different from "Elizabeth" — took it to the post office herself.

A week rolled by — Aunt Jane's "charm" still worked well; and much to her surprise that good lady found that it not only made Bessie happy, but reacted on herself, and created a new warmth about her heart. Smiles began to grow common around her mouth, and altogether — so wonderful is that "charm" — the whole house seemed to grow brighter and warmer.

One night, Christmas eve it was, something queer happened. They had gone to bed, and Aunt Jane was roused out of her first doze by a strange noise. She lifted her head and listened. It seemed to be coming down the street, and was like nothing she had ever heard. It grew louder; she sat up in bed to hear better, and at the same moment a door softly opened, and a white, scared face peered in.

"Oh, Auntie! What is that *awful* noise?" came trembling from Bessie's lips.

"I don't know, child," said her aunt, "but come in here; we 'll soon see, for it 's coming nearer."

Nearer it came. The most hideous wails and cries, like a crowd of people in direst agony. Bessie crept into her aunt's bed in terror, while the sounds came ever nearer, accompanied by the noise of a wagon, driven frantically down the street. At last, opposite the door, the wagon seemed to stop, and the mysterious sounds were frightful. Aunt Jane slipped out of bed, and peeped through the blinds.

"Oh, what is it?" gasped Bessie.

"It seems to be a wagon," said Aunt Jane, "with a box! He is taking it out! — and bringing it into my yard! What in the world! — I'll stop it! — I won't have it!" and she turned hastily to seize her wrapper. At that instant came a dreadful peal of the door-bell, and the wagon drove furiously off, while the sounds came with fearful distinctness.

"Oh, what 'll you do?" cried Bessie, half dead with terror.

"Go and see what it is," said Aunt Jane resolutely, hunting about for slippers and matches, and everything that is always out of the way when needed.

"I'm afraid to stay alone," sobbed Bessie.

"Then come along," said Aunt Jane grimly, as she started down the stairs.

Out of bed sprang the child, and followed close at her heels. On the stairway Aunt Jane lighted the gas, and then proceeded to draw bolt and bar which held the door.

"Oh, Aunt Jane! I'm so frightened!" whispered Bessie.

"Well, then stand behind me," said Aunt Jane hurriedly, as she turned the knob. The door unclosed a little. "Who's there?" she asked.

For reply came a louder, nearer, more horrible wail — nothing else.

Bessie screamed, but something familiar in the sound seemed to strike Aunt Jane.

"Why, goodness gracious! it's *cats!*" she cried. "Some bad boys have done it, knowing that I hate cats."

"But why do they cry so?" asked Bessie, still more than half afraid.

"Must be starved," said Aunt Jane, "but what can I do? I can't leave them here yowling all night."

"Oh, Auntie!" exclaimed Bessie, a thought striking her, "could it be my cat? but she never made such a noise."

"Well — well — like enough!" said Aunt Jane, "and she has n't been fed! — But there must be a dozen in that box. Anyway, we 'll see!" and taking hold of a rope handle, she hastily dragged the box into the hall and closed the door.

The top of the box was slats, and between them could be seen a dark moving mass, with many paws grasping the slats, now and then a lashing tail pressing through, and fiery eyes glaring everywhere.

Bessie peered anxiously in.

"They 're the same color as mine — maltese — and there! I see a white nose! I do believe it 's Muff! Muff — poor Muff! poor pussy!" she went on caressingly. A face

came close to the bars, and a long pitiful "mew" replied.

"Oh, it is Muff! You dear old darling!" she cried. "Oh, let me get her out!"

"But wait," said Aunt Jane; "we must get something for them to eat, or they 'll eat us. They 're wild with hunger; must be. But why so many! I can't understand!"

"Nor I," said Bessie, "only I know Muff. What shall we get to eat?"

"There 's nothing in the house," said Aunt Jane reflectively, "except the steak for breakfast! Oh! — and the milk — but that 's only a quart, and won't last a minute; however, we must get what we have."

So they hastily rushed to the kitchen, and brought the pan of milk, and the pound of porterhouse steak, cut into bits. Through the bars they fed out the steak, till the first pangs were quieted and the wailing ceased, and then Aunt Jane got a hammer and pulled off one slat. Through the opening leaped in quick succession *seven* cats!

Aunt Jane laughed, but she jumped upon

a chair, while the poor creatures instantly crowded around the pan of milk. Seeing them quiet, Aunt Jane stepped down.

"But why *seven!*" she continually repeated.

"Where can they stay to-night?" asked Bessie anxiously. "I made a bed for Muff in the shed — but *seven!*"

"They must all go into the shed to-night," said Aunt Jane, "and in the morning we 'll see."

In the morning came a letter from the good-natured farmer who had given Muff a home since Bessie left. In it he said: "Since you went, your cat has brought up a family of kittens, and remembering how fond you are of kittens, and not knowing what else to do with them, — for everybody around here is well supplied with cats, — I send them too. I thought maybe you could give them away in the city."

"Oh, dear! they 're every one Muffie's own kittens!" she exclaimed.

"Kittens!" said Aunt Jane.

"Well, they are pretty big," said Bessie, "but they belong to Muff," she added timidly, fearing that seven cats were really too many for one who "hated cats."

"Well," said Aunt Jane at last, "I'll tell you what I'll do, Bessie dear. I'll keep the cats till we find good homes for them, for they are choice, — as cats go, — but I can't consent to keep, for good, any but Muff."

Bessie was obliged to be contented, and she and Aunt Jane went vigorously to work to find homes. One by one they were comfortably settled in life till but two were left, Muff and the prettiest of the kits, a pure maltese. She was an affectionate puss, and had specially clung to Aunt Jane, rubbing against her dress when she came near, and jumping up to rub her head against Aunt Jane's hand. She even sprang into her lap, and after gently putting her down once or twice, Aunt Jane actually at last let her stay a little while.

"Auntie," said Bessie, one evening, "I've asked every girl in school, and the milkman, and the washerwoman, and the grocery boy,

and everybody I can think of, and nobody wants another kitten. What can we do?"

"Well, Bessie," said Aunt Jane slowly, "I've been thinking. A cat taught me a charm one day, and it has worked so well that I've concluded to let you keep two cats."

"Oh, you dear old Auntie!" cried Bessie, throwing her arms around her neck, "and you don't hate cats any more?"

"Well, dear," said Aunt Jane, putting her arm around the child, "I'm not fond of them yet, but they're affectionate little creatures, and I owe the race something."

"I'm afraid you've heard all my stories, Kristy," said Miss Martin, the little schoolmistress. "I'm sure I have told you about a funny Christmas celebration that I know about. It was, in fact, the first I ever heard of, when I was a child out West."

"Oh, no, you haven't," said Kristy eagerly. "Do tell it! It's so much nicer to have a story about people we know."

CHAPTER XIII

MAY'S HAPPY THOUGHT

Well then: May Dayton had lost her father and mother and come to live with her cousins, the Stanleys, in the far West. About a week before Christmas, she asked Jeanie Stanley what they usually did on Christmas.

"Christmas?" said Jeanie. "Why, nothing; only just not go to school."

"Nothing!" said May, aghast. "Don't you have any Christmas tree?"

"Christmas tree! What's that?" asked Jeanie.

"Nor hang up your stocking?"

Jeanie shook her head.

"Nor have a single bit of a present?" May went on in utter amazement.

"What for?" asked Jeanie.

"Why, don't you know about Santa Claus, who comes down the chimney on Christmas

eve, and gives everybody a present?" said May, completely bewildered.

"Don't know nothing 'bout him," said Jeanie. "Don't b'lieve there's any such a person in Missouri."

May drew a long sigh.

"What is a Christmas tree, anyway?" asked Jeanie, seeing that May was not going to speak.

"Oh, it's a beautiful green tree, covered with lights and presents and beautiful things! When Mamma was alive we always had one on Christmas eve."

"Does it grow so?" asked Jeanie curiously.

"Of course not! What a question!" said May. "Do you know what Christmas *is*, anyhow?" she added, with a quick flush of color.

"Of course I do," retorted Jeanie; "but *that* has n't anything to do with Christmas trees."

"Yes, it has," said May earnestly, "a great deal to do with them, and with every way that we have for making everything just as sweet

and lovely as we can on that day. Mother always said so."

Jeanie opened her eyes wider, and then asked softly:

"But what about the Christmas tree, May?"

"Well, it 's cut down and brought into the house, and all the things put on before you see it, and when it 's all ready the folding doors are opened, and — oh! it 's beautiful!" May added in ecstasy. "Last Christmas I had such lovely things: the prettiest blue dress you ever saw — I 've got a piece of it in my trunk — and new clothes for my doll — oh, such nice ones! — a whole suit with overskirt, and all in the fashion; and a cornucopia of candies and a box of nuts and raisins and — Oh, I can't think of half the things," added May brightly, yet half ready to cry.

"I wish I could see one," said Jeanie, "but we don't have such things here. Ma has n't got time, nor anybody."

"I 'll tell you what we can do, I guess," said May, who had been revolving an idea in her mind. "We might get up one ourselves, —

of course it would n't be so nice as Mamma's, but it would be better than none."

"Well, let's!" said Jeanie, "and not tell a single one till it's all done."

"Where can we have it? We need a fire and a door that 'll lock," said May.

"Oh, Pa 'll let me have the out-room, I know, if I coax him," said Jeanie, "and we can put a nail over the latch to fasten the door."

The out-room, you must know, was a roughly built room, a little apart from the house. It had a big open fireplace and a huge kettle, and when there was any big work, like making up the year's soap, or putting down the year's supply of salt pork, a great fire was built there and the out-room came into use.

"Well," said May reflectively, "I guess we can do it; we can trim it up, you know."

"How?" asked Jeanie, to whom all Christmas ways were unknown mysteries.

"Oh, I 'll show you. We can get evergreens in the woods, and oh, some of that lovely bitter-sweet, and I can make paper

flowers," May went on enthusiastically, as ideas rushed into her mind. "We can have it real pretty; but don't let's tell anybody a thing about it."

The next week was a very busy one for the two plotters. Every moment, when out of school, they were whispering in corners, or engaged in some mysterious work, which they would hide if any one came near.

Mrs. Stanley was glad to see the first cheerful look on the face of the orphan, and did not interfere so long as the girls kept out of her way. The boys — of whom there were two younger and one older than Jeanie — were very curious, and Jack — the older one — rather teasing about it; but on the whole May and Jeanie succeeded very well in keeping their secret.

Two days before Christmas, Jeanie followed her father as he started off in the morning to the barn to feed the cattle. How she managed her teasing I cannot say, but in a short time she came into the house radiant, gave a mysterious nod to May, and they at once dis-

appeared up-stairs. Soon they stole down the back way, armed themselves with brooms, materials for a fire, and a big nail with which to lock the door, and then slipped into the out-room.

It was not a promising looking place, but they were young and enthusiastic, so Jeanie went to work to build a roaring fire and May began with the broom.

Well; they worked all day, harder than ever before in their lives, and all the next day, and when at last the room was ready for company it really looked very pretty. The bare walls were ornamented with wreaths of the gay bitter-sweet and evergreen boughs brightened with an occasional rose or lily neatly made by May of thin white paper. The big kettle was transformed into a table by means of a board or two across the top, and a white sheet spread over all. The two windows were curtained with old newspapers concealed by branches of evergreens. In the middle of the room stood a tub, and braced up in it with sticks of wood hidden under sprays of green,

stood a very pretty evergreen tree. There were no candles on it, for the united wisdom of the two workers had not been able to accomplish that. But the bright flickering light of the fire was enough, and in fact made just the right effect, since it did not reveal too much.

On the tree were hung pretty things out of May's trunk — keepsakes from her old playmates. These were used merely for decoration, but besides these were long strings of popped corn, and a present for each one of the family.

All this time one of the girls had been obliged to stay in the room every minute, to keep the door locked, for the boys were just wild to find out the mystery. Mrs. Stanley had stopped in her dreary round of drudgery — for this home was the temple of work — to ask what all the fuss was about. But Jeanie told her that father said she might use the outroom, and Mrs. Stanley was too busy and tired to feel much interest, so she said, Well, she did n't care if they did n't do any mischief.

At night — Christmas eve — when called to supper, May went in, for Jeanie could not tear herself away from the wonderful tree. To her it was the most beautiful and enchanting thing in the world. With no books but school-books, no pictures, no papers, nothing beautiful to be seen in that little grinding prairie home, she had never even imagined anything so lovely.

When they rose from the table May stopped at the door. "Aunt," she began timidly, for she was rather afraid of the hard-working woman whose sharp gray eyes seemed to look through her and whose lips never opened except to make some practical remark, "will you come over with uncle and see our Christmas tree? Come, boys!" and she started off.

"So that 's what the young ones have been up to, is it?" said Mr. Stanley, lighting his pipe. "Come, mother, let 's go over and see what they 've got. That May 's the beater for plans if ever I see one."

"Wall," said Mrs. Stanley, pushing back the table that she had already cleared, "I

don't mind if I step over a minute before I get out my dish-water. I never see Jane so took up as she has been this week."

They went over to the out-room. The boys were already there, staring in a bewilderment of wonder. May leaned against the unique table, very tired, but happy, and Jeanie fairly danced around with delight.

"Well, well!" said Mr. Stanley, "this looks something like, now! Why, this carries me back to when I was a boy, away down in York state. I'd never 'a' thought you two little gals could fix this old room up so pretty; would you now, mother?"

"Mother" did n't say anything. There was a sort of a choke in her throat, and something suspiciously like a tear in her eye, as she looked at the bright, happy faces of her children — faces such as she had never seen since they were babies, before they were initiated into the regular family grind.

After a moment she recovered herself, went up to May, and, to her utter amazement, gave her a warm kiss, and said:

"It 's beautiful, dear, and I thank you for it." And then she looked a few minutes, and said she must go. But Jeanie sprang up.

"Wait, Ma; the presents are coming yet."

"Presents!" said Mr. Stanley, "are there presents, then?"

"Oh, of course!" said May, "else how could it be a Christmas tree?"

"Sure enough!" said Mr. Stanley.

May now went up to the tree and took down first a pretty necktie for Jack, made out of some of her bits of silk.

"Why, that 's just the very thing I want," said Jack, amazed. "How did you know that, you witch? and who made it?"

"Jeanie and I," said May.

"No, May made it most every bit," said Jeanie. "I don't know how."

Next came a pair of warm red mittens for Harry.

"Jeanie made these," said May. "I can't knit."

Well, so they went on. Mrs. Stanley had a pretty pin-cushion for her bureau; Mr. Stan-

ley a neat bag for his tobacco; Johnny a pair of wristlets to keep his wrists warm. Each of the children had a little bag of nicely cracked hickory-nuts, a beautiful red apple, and a few sticks of molasses candy. The girls had nothing; they had been so busy they never thought of themselves.

When the presents were all distributed, and the children were busy eating nuts and candy, and having a merry time naming apple seeds, and doing other things that May taught them, Mrs. Stanley stole out, and went back to the kitchen to her dish-washing. But something was the matter, for she moved more slowly than ever before; she let the water run over, put the soap into the milk-cup, and made various other blunders. She was thinking.

And when all the family were in bed that night, and she and Mr. Stanley were sitting alone by the fire, she spoke her thoughts.

"John, that tree has set me a-thinking. We ain't doing just right by our children. It 's all work and no play, and they 're growing old and sober before their time. We 're fore-

handed enough now to let up on them a little."

"You 're right, mother," said Mr. Stanley. "I 've been thinking the same thing myself. That little gal, with her pretty, lady-like ways, does make me think so much of her mother, only 't wa'n't natural to her to be so down-hearted as the little one has been. But see her to-night! I declare I 'd do anything a' most to keep that happy face on her. What shall we do, Sally?"

"Well," said Mrs. Stanley, her face unwontedly bright with new thoughts, "it is n't eight o'clock yet, and I've been thinking if you 'd go to the village and buy a few things to put by their beds for Christmas it would be good. Children think so much of such things," she added, half apologetically.

"So it would! and I 'll do it, wife," said Mr. Stanley, taking his boots out of the corner, and hastening to put them on. "Make out your list, and I 'll go down to Kennedy's. He don't shut up till nine."

Kennedy's was a country store, where you

could buy everything, from a needle to a threshing-machine, and about nine o'clock Mr. Stanley came home with a market-basket full of things. There was a gay merino dress for Jeanie, a pair of skates for May, a new knife for Jack, a sled and a picture-book for each of the boys.

There was, besides these, a package of real store candy, some raisins, and, down under the whole, where Mrs. Stanley could not see it, a neat dark dress for her, which Mr. Stanley had bought to surprise her.

Well, everybody *was* surprised the next morning, you may be sure, and after the breakfast — of which little was eaten — Jack went out and killed a turkey. Jeanie and May put on big aprons and helped ; Jack chopped stuffing and suet; and, for the first time in their lives, the children had a real Christmas dinner — plum pudding and all.

That was the beginning of a new life in the plain farmhouse. Little by little books found their way to the table, an easy chair or two stole into the rooms, pictures made their ap-

pearance on the walls, and in time a wing was added to the house. After a while a neat-handed farmer's daughter came to help mother. Shrubbery came up in the yard, vines began to grow over the windows, and the fence had a new coat of paint. Now that she was not always tired out, mother began to go out among her neighbors; friendly visits followed, then a tea-party. Jack joined the book-club in the village, and mother invited them to meet at her house in turn. In fact, some innocent pleasures came into these hard-worked lives, and all owing — as Mr. Stanley would say, holding the bright happy May on his knee — "to this little girl's Christmas tree."

"That 's splendid!" said Kristy, "and where is Cousin May now, Miss Martin?"

"Oh, she has a home of her own out West, and I 've seen many a Christmas tree in it."

"That was a good deal to be done by one little girl," said Aunt Mary, "but I have known wonders worked in another way by a

more helpless object than the weakest girl, by a pair of shoes, even, or a little bisque figure."

"That must be magic," said grandmother.

"Tell us a story of magic; do!" said Kristy. "I always liked impossible stories."

"But this is not at all impossible," said Aunt Mary, "though it is a story of magical effects that I propose to tell. But before I begin, lest some of you young ones," looking around with a smile at her audience of "grown-ups," "should make a mistake, I will say that the magic is not in the figure, but in the thought back of it."

"Oh! Oh!" cried the audience, "to give us the moral before the story!"

"Well, do go on, Aunt Mary," interrupted Kristy. "Don't mind what they say! the moral's good for them! and besides, the story's for me."

"So it is, dear, and now I begin with Kate Barlow's talk to her mother."

CHAPTER XIV

THE MAGIC FIGURE

"I DON'T mind giving up an hour or two to go and read to sick folks," exclaimed Kate crossly, "if they 'll only keep their rooms half decent."

"Why, what's the matter now, Kate," asked her mother, "isn't it pleasant at Mary's?"

"Pleasant! it's simply horrid! Such a room I never saw! Furniture covered with dust, tables loaded with medicine things and dirty dishes, every chair with something on it, and I don't believe the windows were *ever* washed."

"But, my dear," said her mother, "you must remember that Mary's mother is poor, and —"

"But she might be clean," interrupted Kate.

"And she has her hands full to take care of all those children."

"Some of them are big enough to help," said Kate. "There 's that Bess! great lazy thing! with an apron a pig would be ashamed to wear!"

"Who is this Mary?" quietly asked Miss Faith, a lady who had come to visit Kate's mother only the day before.

"One of Kate's schoolmates," said Mrs. Barlow, "who fell on the ice and was hurt last winter. She is obliged to lie perfectly still, but the doctors hope she will be well after some months."

"Poor, did you say?" went on Miss Faith.

"Well, not beggars," said Mrs. Barlow, "but they have close work to get along. Her mother is a widow with four or five children, on a small income."

"And she does her own work," put in Kate, "what little 's done; but I don't believe she ever clears up Mary's room. I should think she 'd die; I should."

"And it would n't do, I suppose, to speak to her about it?" suggested Miss Faith.

"Dear me, no!" said Mrs. Barlow; "she 's a high-spirited woman; has been used to better times. She would be mortally offended."

"I've seen such cases," said Miss Faith, with a smile, "and I know what to do for them. Kate, I think I can help you."

"I don't know what you can do," sighed Kate; "it seems to me a hopeless case."

"I'll use magic!" said Miss Faith, smiling.

"What!" exclaimed Kate and her mother in one breath.

"I'll send Mary a present," went on Miss Faith, "that shall work magic in the house; you 'll be surprised at the result."

"If it clears up that house it 'll be magic, sure enough," said Kate.

"It will!" said Miss Faith quietly. "I never knew it to fail. It will not take ten days to accomplish all you can ask."

"I must say I'd like to see it," said Kate, half unbelieving.

"Come up to my room and I'll show you," said Miss Faith, rising.

Kate followed her eagerly to her room, where she unlocked and opened her trunk. The contents of the trunk were rather unusual, but then Miss Faith was rather an unusual person. For dress she cared very little, yet she always was accompanied on her journeys by a big trunk. Kate had often wondered what was in it, and now she looked on with curiosity as Miss Faith took out one thing after another: a pile of children's clothes; three or four pairs of shoes of different sizes; several books — children's books; toys of a cheap and durable kind, and other things equally strange for an elderly lady to carry about in her trunk.

Kate could not help an exclamation of surprise, as these various objects came to light. Miss Faith smiled.

"Queer, is n't it, dear, but these are my magical tools, and here I think I have the particular one you need," and she opened a small wooden box, took out a quantity of soft pack-

ing paper, and thus uncovered a little bisque figure. It was not more than eight inches high, and, of course, it was not very costly, but it was a lovely, graceful thing, the figure of a beautiful child.

"Oh! how pretty!" cried Kate; "what a beautiful face! and such a snowy white! Do you really mean to send Mary that? It 'll look fearfully out of place in her dingy room."

"So I hope," said Miss Faith; "it would show no magic qualities otherwise."

"Well, it 's perfectly lovely, and Mary 'll be crazy over it, but how it 's to clear up that house I must say *I* can't see."

"You will see," said Miss Faith, smiling. "Will you take it over to her with my love?"

"Oh, yes!" said Kate warmly; "I 'd like to see what she says."

Kate took the pretty gift to Mary, and was gratified to report the delight and happiness it caused.

"She had me set it on her bureau," said Kate, "where she could lie and look at it, and

I had to move a dozen things aside to find room for it."

"Near the window?" asked Miss Faith.

"Close by the window," answered Kate, "with horrid dirty muslin curtains, too."

"H'm!" said Miss Faith, "I should n't wonder if that magic began to work to-night."

In truth it began sooner than Miss Faith thought, for hardly was Kate out of the house when Mary said to her mother, who had come up from the kitchen to see the new treasure, "Mother, I could see it better if there were n't so many things on the bureau. I wish you 'd take some off."

"I will," said the mother, pleased to see Mary interested, and she went to the bureau and in two minutes had it completely cleared.

"Thank you," said Mary in a pleased tone; "that is nice, it looks lovely now."

The magic worked on. The next morning Mary lay in her room alone, looking with untiring interest on the beautiful gift. It was so delicate, so white; suddenly she noticed that the curtains which hung near it looked

extremely dingy by contrast. "Mother," she said when she was eating her breakfast a little later, "could n't you have my curtains washed? They 're awful dirty."

"They do look a little dingy," said her mother with a sigh, "but washings are so big that I kind o' put off things."

"Could n't Bess help?" suggested Mary.

"Could if she had a mind to," said her mother; "but you know what Bess is, I can't make the least impression on her if I scold from morning to night."

"I suppose not," said Mary thoughtfully. "I wish I could —"

"But you can't," interrupted her mother, "and you mus' n't fret about it, dearie. I 'll get the curtains washed somehow," for to keep Mary from fretting under her tiresome confinement was her mother's great anxiety.

"Don't you do it, Mother," said Mary. "I 'll get Bess to do it — if I can," she added doubtfully.

"Well, you may try her," said Mrs. Benton, "and if she won't do it, I will."

After studying up a plan, Mary went to work quite skillfully on her easy-going sister. She talked about the figure, drew her on to tell how much she admired it, and then called her attention to the dingy looks of the curtains beside it.

"If I was only able," she ended with a sigh, "I would have them washed and ironed before night," and then in a sudden way she offered Bess a book of hers if *she* would do it.

Bess wanted the book, and moreover was sorry — in her lazy way — for her sister, and, after a moment's thought, she consented.

The curtains were soon down and in the wash-tub, and then Mary had a chance to notice the windows.

"Why, how dirty they are!" she said to herself; "they ought to be washed while the curtains are down. Mother 's busy and Bess 'll be too tired," she reflected. Then her eyes fell on a little sister, eight years old, who was playing on the floor. "Susy," she said, "I wonder if you could n't wash the windows for sister."

"'Course I can," said Susy, delighted with the idea of unlimited soap and water.

"Well; suppose you do it then," went on Mary coaxingly, "and see if you can't get it all done to surprise mother when she comes up."

Charmed to do grown-up work, Susy went at it eagerly. Under Mary's instructions she brought warm water and other things, and was soon very busy indeed. After a good deal of rubbing, and many directions on Mary's part, Susy managed to get the lower panes pretty clean, but the upper ones Mary dared not let her climb up to try. It was not very satisfactory, to be sure, for the clear glasses only made the others look worse than before.

"Why, Susy!" exclaimed the mother when she came up and heard who had been washing windows, "how nicely you 've made the panes look! Mother 'll have to wash the upper ones herself to match them." And she did too, so that before night Mary had clean windows and clean white curtains.

Kate, who came the next day to read to

Mary, went home with wide-open eyes. "Why, Miss Faith, I do believe it is magic! If you 'll credit me, they 've begun to clean up; really, clean windows and spick-and-span white curtains. I could hardly believe my eyes."

"I told you it would work," said Miss Faith quietly. "It is n't done yet."

Truly it was not, for the next day Mary began to notice the littered appearance of the room, the medicine bottles and cups, and the confusion generally.

"The windows look so nice," she said to Susy, who was her most constant attendant, "that I wish you would clear up a little more."

"What shall I do?" asked good-natured Susy.

"Well," began Mary, "first take all the dirty dishes out, and set them in the hall where mother or Bess can take them downstairs."

Many times back and forth trotted the busy little feet before this was done.

"Now you can take all the empty bottles,"

said Mary, "and put them on the shelf in the hall cupboard." So they went on, Mary directing and Susy working, and after an hour's labor the room was much improved.

"Why, how slick you look up here! What's got into you all of a sudden!" exclaimed Mrs. Benton, when she came up.

"Why," explained Mary, "the windows looked so clean it made the rest of the room seem very mussy, and Susy's been clearing up for me; has n't she done it nicely?"

"Very," assented her mother, "and it does seem more attractive."

"When I don't see anything else," added Mary in a low tone.

"Sure enough, poor child!" said her mother. "We won't let the room get so again."

That day again Kate rushed home with a tale of wonders done by that magic gift.

Still the charm worked. The next day she found the floor swept and the furniture dusted; the third day Mary had a clean white counterpane in place of the old soiled one, and a white towel on her medicine stand; the fourth

day a hole in the carpet over which Kate had several times stumbled, was neatly mended; the fifth day the hall was swept and the stairs washed, and the sixth day the whole house had an unwontedly clean air.

Nor was this all; the charm worked on the people as well as on the house. First Kate noticed that Susy had clean face and hands, next that her dress had been washed and mended. Then she saw an improvement in Bess's appearance, and later a gradual change in the looks of every one of the household, even to Mrs. Benton herself. Every day she went home with new wonders to tell, and fresh surprise at the simple cause of all the changes.

"Why, it 's a real pleasure to go there now," she said one day, "and all the girls say so. Mary seems ever so much brighter too; I do believe she 's better."

"No doubt she is," said Miss Faith; "there 's no doctor so good as an interest in things around one. Does she still care for the bisque figure?"

"Care for it! why, she about worships it. That Bess — sure 's you live — has patched up some sort of a bracket out of half a flour-barrel cover and some bits of cloth and bright braid, and you would n't believe it, but it 's real pretty and bright, and she nailed it up between the windows, and on it stands that blessed figure. It really gives the room an air!"

"And I want to tell you, Miss Faith," Kate went on eagerly, "the girls in Mary's class, seeing how hard she tries to have her room pretty, have made a plan to fix it up nice for a Christmas surprise for her. We 've talked it over a little, and it 's going to be splendid. Carry Bates — her father keeps a paper-hanging store — says she 's most sure he 'll give paper enough to cover her wall, and perhaps a man to put it on, and Luly Jones is going to get some pretty cretonne out of her father's store, to cover the lounge and a pillow for it; we 've got money enough among us to buy matting for the floor, and Mamma says I may give her my Persian rug; and then we 're all

going to give books and little pictures, and everything pretty we can get. We mean to make her room lovely. Is n't it grand!"

"Indeed it is, Kate!" said Miss Faith warmly, "and I 'll help. What shall I do? You may decide."

A bright expression came into Kate's face, then a look of doubt.

"What is it, dear? Tell me just what you wish," said Miss Faith, watching her keenly.

"Would you spend some money?" began Kate hesitatingly, "a good deal, I 'm afraid."

"What for?" demanded Miss Faith.

"Oh, for an invalid bed, that can be lifted up at the head, so she can most sit up, or lie down flat. We did want to buy one awfully! but we knew it would cost too much. The girls had n't much money," Kate pleaded.

Miss Faith thought a moment.

"If I do that, Kate, it will take all my Christmas money," she said gravely. "All the young people to whom I usually make presents will have to go without."

"Oh, I 'm sure, dear Miss Faith," said

Kate warmly, "they would all be glad to, if they could only know how good it would be for Mary; and she has to lie there *always*," she added with a shudder. "Think how fearful that is!"

"Well," said Miss Faith, "I'll do it, Kate. You girls select the bed and have the bill sent to me. The magic works beyond Mary Benton's chamber, you see."

"Sure enough," said Kate thoughtfully; "it was that figure began it," and as she walked hastily down in the village to tell the girls the good news about the invalid bed, she thought the whole thing over, from the first day, less than two weeks ago, when Miss Faith had taken the bisque figure out of her trunk, till now. Wonderful indeed had been the changes, not only in Mary's room, but spreading over the house, and then among the school-girls who visited Mary. And at last, as she ran up the steps of Carry Bates's house, came her conclusion: "Well; there must have been magic about that little bisque figure."

It was now getting quite late in the evening, and Mamma, who was last in the circle, suggested that Kristy had heard stories enough for one evening, and that her story better be put off till some other time.

But a chorus of the story-tellers insisted that she should herself follow the rule she had so sternly enforced upon others. Kristy, too, would not hear of postponement. "I can make you tell me another to-morrow," she said, whereupon the audience laughed and applauded, and in the midst of this confusion Mamma knocked on the fire-dogs for silence.

"If I must tell the story, I wish to begin, for it is quite time my patient went to bed. I shall tell of a poor Irish woman I read about last winter in the papers."

"And went to see," whispered Kristy to Uncle John, who was arranging the fire.

Mamma did not hear her, but began at once.

CHAPTER XV

CHRISTMAS IN THE ALLEY

"I DECLARE for 't, to-morrow is Christmas day an' I clean forgot all about it," said old Ann, the washerwoman, pausing in her work and holding the flat-iron suspended in the air.

"Much good it 'll do us," growled a discontented voice from the coarse bed in the corner.

"We have n't much extra, to be sure," answered Ann cheerfully, bringing the iron down onto the shirt-bosom before her, "but at least we 've enough to eat, and a good fire, and that 's more 'n some have, not a thousand miles from here either."

"We might have plenty more," said the fretful voice, "if you did n't think so much more of strangers than you do of your own folks' comfort, keeping a houseful of beggars, as if you was a lady!"

"Now, John," replied Ann, taking another

iron from the fire, "you 're not half so bad as you pretend. You would n't have me turn them poor creatures into the streets to freeze, now would you?"

"It 's none of our business to pay rent for them," grumbled John. "Every one for himself, I say, these hard times. If they can't pay you 'd ought to send 'em off; there 's plenty as can."

"They 'd pay quick enough if they could get work," said Ann. "They 're good honest fellows, every one, and paid me regular as long as they had a cent. But when hundreds are out o' work in the city, what can they do?"

"That 's none o' your business, you can turn 'em out!" growled John.

"And leave the poor children to freeze as well as starve?" said Ann. "Who 'd ever take 'em in without money, I 'd like to know? No, John," bringing her iron down as though she meant it, "I 'm glad I 'm well enough to wash and iron, and pay my rent, and so long as I can do that, and keep the hunger away from you and the child, I 'll never turn the

poor souls out, leastways not in this freezing winter weather."

"An' here 's Christmas," the old man went on whiningly, "an' not a penny to spend, an' I needin' another blanket so bad, with my rhumatiz, an' have n't had a drop o' tea for I don't know how long!"

"I know it," said Ann, never mentioning that she too had been without tea, and not only that, but with small allowance of food of any kind, "and I'm desperate sorry I can't get a bit of something for Katey. The child never missed a little something in her stocking before."

"Yes," John struck in, "much you care for your flesh an' blood. The child ha'n't had a thing this winter."

"That 's true enough," said Ann, with a sigh, "an' it 's the hardest thing of all that I've had to keep her out o' school when she was doing so beautiful."

"An' her feet all on the ground," John growled.

"I know her shoes is bad," said Ann, hang-

ing the shirt up on a line that stretched across the room, and was already nearly full of freshly ironed clothes, "but they 're better than the Parker children's."

"What 's that to us?" almost shouted the weak old man, shaking his fist at her in his rage.

"Well, keep your temper, old man," said Ann. "I 'm sorry it goes so hard with you, but as long as I can stand on my feet, I sha'n't turn anybody out to freeze, that 's certain."

"How much 'll you get for them?" said the miserable old man, after a few moments' silence, indicating by his hand the clean clothes on the line.

"Two dollars," said Ann, "and half of it must go to help make up next month's rent. I 've got a good bit to make up yet, and only a week to do it in, and I sha'n't have another cent till day after to-morrow."

"Well, I wish you 'd manage to buy me a little tea," whined the old man; "seems as if that would go right to the spot, an' warm up my old bones a bit."

"I 'll try," said Ann, revolving in her mind how she could save a few pennies from her indispensable purchases, to get tea and sugar, for without sugar he would not touch it.

Wearied with his unusual exertion, the old man now dropped off to sleep, and Ann went softly about, folding and piling the clothes into a big basket already half full. When they were all packed in, and nicely covered with a piece of clean muslin, she took an old shawl and hood from a nail in the corner, put them on, blew out the candle, for it must not burn one moment unnecessarily, and taking up her basket, went out into the cold winter night, softly closing the door behind her.

The house was on an alley, but as soon as she turned the corner she was in the bright streets, glittering with lamps and gay people. The shop windows were brilliant with Christmas displays, and thousands of warmly dressed buyers were lingering before them, laughing and chatting, and selecting their purchases. Surely it seemed as if there could be no want here.

As quickly as her burden would let her, the old washerwoman passed through the crowd into a broad street and rang the basement bell of a large, showy house.

"Oh, it's the washerwoman!" said a flashy-looking servant who answered the bell; "set the basket right in here. Mrs. Keithe can't look them over to-night, there's company in the parlor — Miss Carry's Christmas party."

"Ask her to please pay me — at least a part," said old Ann hastily. "I don't see how I can do without the money. I counted on it."

"I'll ask her," said the pert young woman, turning to go up-stairs; "but it's no use."

Returning in a moment, she delivered the message. "She has no change to-night, you're to come in the morning."

"Dear me!" thought Ann, as she plodded back through the streets, "it'll be even worse than I expected, for there's not a morsel to eat in the house, and not a penny to buy one with. Well — well — the Lord will provide, the Good Book says, but it's mighty dark days, and it's hard to believe."

Entering the house, Ann sat down silently before the expiring fire. She was tired, her bones ached, and she was faint for want of food.

Wearily she rested her head on her hands, and tried to think of some way to get a few cents. She had nothing she could sell or pawn, everything she could do without had gone before, in similar emergencies. After sitting there some time, and revolving plan after plan, only to find them all impossible, she was forced to conclude that they must go supperless to bed.

Her husband grumbled and Katey — who came in from a neighbor's — cried with hunger, and after they were asleep old Ann crept into bed to keep warm, more disheartened than she had been all winter.

If we could only see a little way ahead! All this time — the darkest the house on the alley had seen — help was on the way to them. A kind-hearted city missionary, visiting one of the unfortunate families living in the upper rooms of old Ann's house, had learned from

them of the noble charity of the humble old washerwoman. It was more than princely charity, for she not only denied herself nearly every comfort, but she endured the reproaches of her husband, and the tears of her child.

Telling the story to a party of his friends this Christmas eve, their hearts were touched, and they at once emptied their purses into his hands for her. And the gift was at that very moment in the pocket of the missionary, waiting for morning to make her Christmas happy.

Christmas morning broke clear and cold. Ann was up early, as usual, made her fire, with the last of her coal, cleared up her two rooms, and leaving her husband and Katey in bed, was about starting out to try and get her money, to provide a breakfast for them. At the door she met the missionary.

"Good-morning, Ann," he said. "I wish you a merry Christmas."

"Thank you, sir," said Ann cheerfully; "the same to yourself."

"Have you been to breakfast already?" asked the missionary.

"No, sir," said Ann. "I was just going out for it."

"I have n't either," said he, "but I could n't bear to wait till I had eaten breakfast before I brought you your Christmas present — I suspect you have n't had any yet."

Ann smiled. "Indeed, sir, I have n't had one since I can remember."

"Well, I have one for you. Come in, and I 'll tell you about it."

Too much amazed for words, Ann led him into the room. The missionary opened his purse, and handed her a roll of bills.

"Why! — what! —" she gasped, taking it mechanically.

"Some friends of mine heard of your generous treatment of the poor families up-stairs," he went on, "and they send you this, with their respects and best wishes for Christmas. Do just what you please with it — it is wholly yours. No thanks," he went on, as she struggled to speak. "It 's not from me. Just enjoy it — that 's all. It has done them more good to give than it can you to receive,"

and before she could speak a word he was gone.

What did the old washerwoman do?

Well — first she fell on her knees and buried her agitated face in the bedclothes. After a while she became aware of a storm of words from her husband, and she got up, subdued — as much as possible — her agitation, and tried to answer his frantic questions.

"How much did he give you, old stupid?" he screamed; "can't you speak, or are you struck dumb? — Wake up! — I just wish I could reach you! — I'd shake you till your teeth rattled!"

If his vicious looks were a sign, it was evident that he only lacked the strength to be as good as his word.

Ann roused herself from her stupor and spoke at last.

"I don't know. I'll count it." She unrolled the bills and began.

"O Lord!" she exclaimed excitedly, "here's ten-dollar bills! One, two, three, and a twenty — that makes five — and five are fifty-five —

sixty—seventy—eighty—eighty-five—ninety—one hundred—and two and five are seven, and two and one are ten, twenty—twenty-five—one hundred and twenty-five! Why, I'm rich!" she shouted. "Bless the Lord! Oh, this is the glorious Christmas day! I knew He'd provide. Katey! Katey!" she screamed at the door of the other room, where the child lay asleep. "Merry Christmas to you, darlin'! Now you can have some shoes! and a new dress! and—and—breakfast, and a regular Christmas dinner! Oh! I believe I shall go crazy!"

But she did not. Joy seldom hurts people, and she was brought back to every-day affairs by the querulous voice of her husband.

"Now I will have my tea, an' a new blanket, an' some tobacco—how I have wanted a pipe!" and he went on enumerating his wants while Ann bustled about, putting away most of her money, and once more getting ready to go out.

"I'll run out and get some breakfast," she

said, "but don't you tell a soul about the money."

"No! they'll rob us!" shrieked the old man.

"Nonsense! I'll hide it well, but I want to keep it a secret for another reason. Mind, Katey, don't you tell."

"No!" said Katey, with wide eyes. "But can I truly have a new frock, Mammy, and new shoes? — and is it really Christmas?"

"It's really Christmas, darlin'," said Ann, "and you'll see what Mammy'll bring home to you, after breakfast."

The luxurious meal of sausages, potatoes, and hot tea was soon smoking on the table, and was eagerly devoured by Katey and her father. But Ann could not eat much. She was absent-minded, and only drank a cup of tea. As soon as breakfast was over, she left Katey to wash the dishes, and started out again.

She walked slowly down the street, revolving a great plan in her mind.

"Let me see," she said to herself. "They

shall have a happy day for once. I suppose John 'll grumble, but the Lord has sent me this money, and I mean to use part of it to make one good day for them."

Having settled this in her mind, she walked on more quickly, and visited various shops in the neighborhood. When at last she went home, her big basket was stuffed as full as it could hold, and she carried a bundle besides.

"Here 's your tea, John," she said cheerfully, as she unpacked the basket, "a whole pound of it, and sugar, and tobacco, and a new pipe."

"Give me some now," said the old man eagerly; "don't wait to take out the rest of the things."

"And here 's a new frock for you, Katey," old Ann went on, after making John happy with his treasures, "a real bright one, and a pair of shoes and some real woolen stockings; oh! how warm you 'll be!"

"Oh, how nice, Mammy!" cried Katey, jumping about. "When will you make my frock?"

"To-morrow," answered the mother, "and you can go to school again."

"Oh, goody!" she began, but her face fell. "If only Molly Parker could go too!"

"You wait and see," answered Ann, with a knowing look. "Who knows what Christmas will bring to Molly Parker?"

"Now here 's a nice big roast," the happy woman went on, still unpacking, "and potatoes and turnips and cabbage and bread and butter and coffee and — "

"What in the world! You goin' to give a party?" asked the old man between the puffs, staring at her in wonder.

"I 'll tell you just what I am going to do," said Ann firmly, bracing herself for opposition, "and it 's as good as done, so you need n't say a word about it. I 'm going to have a Christmas dinner, and I 'm going to invite every blessed soul in this house to come. They shall be warm and full for once in their lives, please God! And Katey," she went on breathlessly, before the old man had sufficiently recovered from his astonishment to speak, "go

right up-stairs now, and invite every one of 'em, from the fathers down to Mrs. Parker's baby, to come to dinner at three o'clock; we 'll have to keep fashionable hours, it 's so late now; and mind, Katey, not a word about the money. And hurry back, child, I want you to help me."

To her surprise, the opposition from her husband was less than she expected. The genial tobacco seemed to have quieted his nerves, and even opened his heart. Grateful for this, Ann resolved that his pipe should never lack tobacco while she could work.

But now the cares of dinner absorbed her. The meat and vegetables were prepared, the pudding made, and the long table spread, though she had to borrow every table in the house, and every dish to have enough to go around.

At three o'clock when the guests came in, it was really a very pleasant sight. The bright warm fire, the long table, covered with a substantial, and to them, luxurious meal, all smoking hot. John, in his neatly brushed suit,

in an armchair at the foot of the table, Ann in a bustle of hurry and welcome, and a plate and a seat for every one.

How the half-starved creatures enjoyed it, how the children stuffed and the parents looked on with a happiness that was very near to tears, how old John actually smiled and urged them to send back their plates again and again, and how Ann, the washerwoman, was the life and soul of it all, I can't half tell.

After dinner, when the poor women lodgers insisted on clearing up, and the poor men sat down by the fire to smoke, for old John actually passed around his beloved tobacco, Ann quietly slipped out a few minutes, took four large bundles from a closet under the stairs, and disappeared up-stairs. She was scarcely missed before she was back again.

Well, of course, it was a great day in the house on the alley, and the guests sat long into the twilight before the warm fire talking of their old homes in the fatherland, the hard winter, and prospects for work in the spring.

When at last they returned to the chilly discomfort of their own rooms, each family found a package containing a new warm dress and pair of shoes for every woman and child in the family.

"And I have enough left," said Ann, the washerwoman, to herself, when she was reckoning up the expenses of the day, "to buy my coal and pay my rent till spring, so I can save my old bones a bit. And sure John can't grumble at their staying now, for it's all along of keeping them that I had such a blessed Christmas day at all."

"That's the best of all," said Grandma. "I'm glad Kristy didn't let us lose that story."

"I knew it would be one of the very best," said Kristy warmly. "Mamma does tell beautiful stories. And now I'll go to bed, if you please, and the rest of you may have something to eat after your labors."

The four-hand throne was made once more by her two uncles and Kristy seated upon it.

At the door she asked them to stop a moment while she said good-night.

"My dear guests," she began, "I hope you 've enjoyed the evening half as much as I have. As for me, I thank you for the most delightful Christmas I ever had, and I mean to invite you to do it over again next year."

This announcement was received with groans and cries of "No! no!" but Kristy laughed, kissed her hand good-night, and only said:

"You 'll see!"

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